

## Buddhism sets you free

Religion imprisons our minds with beliefs, dogmas, rituals and guilt. There are also religions that do not or dare not call themselves religion, understandably. But the demand for unquestioning faith is there all the same.

Call Buddhism what you like, but there is something about Buddhism that is truly rewarding if we keep an open mind. No, there is nothing to believe here. Many find this to be one of the hardest things to do. All right, we can say that Buddhism does begin with some kind of beliefs, such as keeping the moral precepts so that our body and speech are in order for the sake of a harmonious family and society. But these are not beliefs: they are universal truths that make human communion harmonious and fruitful.

Then there is Buddhist mind-training or meditation, which even other religions are now adopting. This is because it brings inner peace and clarity. Ultimately mental stillness has no label. In fact, this is what the Buddha of early Buddhism is trying to tell us: truth does not belong to any religion, nor to anyone. It is liberating like the fresh air and space around us.

There are also Buddhisms that call for mere faith, or some ritual. If these work for you, use them. At any time, you find that there is something simpler or better, have the courage to rise to it. Buddhism is about change, and change is occurring all the time if we carefully observe ourselves and things around us.

The Buddha's Buddhism teaches us to keep on letting go of beliefs once we understand them. It is like learning ABC: we first master them, and then learn to spell words and make sentences. Then we read interesting books, and even tell stories to others, and share with them the great wonders of learning.

Early Buddhism is about self-learning. It is like learning to walk: no one can walk for us. As toddlers, we crawled and tried to stand, we fell, stood again, and now we are walking effortlessly (until age catches up, that is).

Wisdom comes in a similar way. Our sufferings arose from various conditions we were not sure about, or we could not prevent them for some reason. But there is a lot to learn from our sufferings. First, we must accept that there is really no one to blame, except conditions: no sin, no fate, no demon, no God, no others. Study the conditions, and understand them, then we will be able to prevent such sufferings, or at least lessen their effects.

Religions that demand all kinds of beliefs and rituals are trying to own us. But such religions are nothing but cunning and desperate people who are trying to control our minds and use our bodies. If any beliefs do not benefit us (they usually don't), we should let them go. If we are not sure what the beliefs are about, it is not benefitting us. The same with rituals: they should help bring some peace and wisdom to us. If not, we do not need to do them.

Beliefs and rituals are often nothing more than public relations and advertisements that money-priests use to hold their clientele and con the gullible. A belief often means something we are not sure about, and are not really helpful. If we care to recall our own past: it is a record of our abandoning belief after belief. That is how

we grow, by shedding the onion-skins of beliefs when the sting of truth opens our eyes.

The rituals that religious professionals charge us for – such as funerals – can all be even more meaningfully done by us, our relatives and friends together. If we truly love the dearly departed, we should give him or her a truly loving friends' funeral. True and good rituals are not public show-offs of guilt or wealth, but a powerful gesture of the heart that feels for others and a good feeling for ourselves.

When Edward Bernays, the “father of public relations,” made a great fortune selling his ideas to corporations and politicians, it really benefitted no one except the corporations and politicians, and Bernays. People in the US were throwing their hard-earned cash into investments, making a lot of money, and living like intoxicated hamsters in the cage of pleasure and plenty. They were all heading for the Great Crash of 1929, the beginning of the 12-year Great Depression. They started blaming everyone else, except themselves.

Now, the religions are using Bernays' tricks in making us to feel guilty and sinful about ourselves as if we are not already suffering enough, and to desire for things (like heaven) that we do not need. Of course, these religions claim they have all the answers. But these are answers to problems that these religions themselves have conjured up.

Religions work best where ignorance and the class system prevail. Yet more evil had been done in the name of religion than much of the rest of history put together. Religion burdens us with the greatest of sufferings when they try to define good and evil for us, even against our better judgement and common sense. The more powerful the religion the greater the damage.<sup>1</sup>

Better than any religion is an open curiosity for the healing truth and liberating insight; a relentless questioning that only brings joy and peace of helpful answers that fruit in self-understanding. And the best person to examine and ask such questions is we ourselves. For, if we do not think for ourselves, we will lose our minds; if we stop feeling, then we are dead. The chains are mind-made, only the mind can break them.

Piya Tan ©2012

---

<sup>1</sup> See eg this documentary on church abuse of children: <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/sex-crimes-and-the-vatican/> & its transcript <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/panorama/5402928.stm>.