

Everything is beautiful—really?

There are two extremes in religion or ways of life today. One extreme is a religion that tells you exactly what to believe or else you would be punished in some eternal way, like being sent to hell or kept out of the group or tribe. The other extreme is a teaching where anything seems to go. Here, there is neither right nor wrong, neither good nor bad. It all depends on how we think, so it seems. The first holds us in a prison of faith, while the second in a prison of words.

The middle way is to learn to think for ourselves, and to trust ourselves. We might start off believing in a religion or living a certain way. As we mature, we somehow feel that something is still missing in our lives despite all the prayer, fellowship, success and happiness. Very often we are held back in a life-style because we are used to a routine of bonds with people we have known so well. Then, one day, we realize that we are really different deep inside. Something is not right.

Most of us might just peer through this little crack in the cocoon of faith and friendship, and then get pulled back into its inner safety, or the little crack gets quickly sealed up again, and we are back in our familiar routine. We have not really changed or grown in any way. We might not even know this.

One of the most important western philosophers, Plato (429-347 BCE), who gave us Socrates' teachings, illustrates this human predicament (in Book 7 of *The Republic*) with his famous parable of the cave. Plato likens those who do not know reality to prisoners chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects, that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are merely shadows and echoes made by objects that they do not see.¹

A famous Australian Buddhist monk, Brahmavamso,² echoes this parable in his teachings, and on which I here elaborate. A group of people, it is said, are born in a harsh prison on an isolated island. They are raised in that prison, and have spent all their lives there so that they know only prison life. They don't even suspect that anything beyond their prison can exist. So they make the best of the island prison.

Those who think positively, because they have gone to prison seminars, begin to think that the harsh prison is really a wonderful place. They even compose songs like "All jails bright and beautiful...the good Lord made them all!"

Others get involved in social service, joyfully and compassionately decorating the prison cells of others. When someone gets punished or tortured in jail, they think something has gone wrong and look for some reason or someone to blame.

If someone suggests that it is the very nature of the prison to be suffering, they are dismissed as a pessimist and told to "Get a life!" They are reminded how beautiful the trees,

¹ S Marc Cohen, 2002: <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm>

² Brahmavamso, "Paṭicca-samuppāda: Dependent origination." *Dhamma Journal* 4,2 July 2003:49-83. Access from http://www.what-buddha-taught.net/Books3/Ajahn_Brahm_Paticca_samuppada_-_Dependent_Origination.htm.

fruits and crops on the prison island are, and the various animals they could catch and eat any time they want to; and the beautiful beaches and lagoon are full of fish and beautiful corals. Although they never see the sun rising, the sun-set is often beautiful, especially when the weather is good. This is truly paradise, so they think.

Now, there are high walls and fences around the prison on the island. The lagoon on the unfenced side of the prison is shallow, but beyond that, the waters are deep and treacherous, infested, it is said, with terrible man-eating demons and sea-monsters. On land, all around, there are thick jungle and high mountains separating this prison from the eastern side of the island. No one is allowed to even talk about what lies beyond the jungle and mountains. So to the prison folks, there is no world or life beyond their paradise prison.

One full moon night, a prisoner discovers a raft, complete with four oars, on the lagoon. He has never seen such a strange object, but with three other friends, they quickly learn how to use the raft. It is simply exhilarating. The night is so peaceful, the sky winking at them with countless bright stars. In the rhythm of the paddling, the watery swishes, and the salty sea smell, they could hear their own gentle breaths, zestful with anticipation over what lies beyond. Yet everything seems to be so profoundly peaceful, something they have never felt before.

As day breaks, they see the sun rising above the horizon -- they have never seen a light so beautiful. Following the coastline, they reach the eastern shore. To their surprise, there are many other people like them there. These friendly natives welcome them, feed them and chatted with them as new friends.

Nearby, on the waters, the four friends see canoes, yachts, and even ships, with people coming and going in them. When they ask what is going on, the natives laughingly tell them these vessels take them wherever they want to go. There are so many other islands, even a large continent over the horizon; so many beautiful places to visit and live in. They are free to travel wherever they want.

As the day passes, the four friends almost forget about their prison home, but feel compelled to return, as they feel the things are so new and unfamiliar in the new world. So they paddle back into the night, heading for their prison home. As they paddle, a heavy feeling overcome them, as if leaving behind something really wonderful. Their hearts become heavier as they come nearer the shore. They are now convinced that the prison is really suffering.

As soon as they meet the other inmates, they tell them about the new found land. Most don't believe them. They can't imagine anything other than their prison. When they say that the prison is suffering and freedom is happiness, they are piously accused by the prison wardens of escapism and warned of the sea-demons.

In fact, the prison wardens are so worried that they fence off the lagoon from the sea. The prisoners are allowed to swim or paddle their boats in the lagoon, but only under the wardens' watchful eyes. In the dark of night, however, one or two of them, some say, sometimes small groups, quietly paddle away through a remote unfenced neck of the lagoon and head for the free new world.

Piya Tan ©2012 rev