

No need to give up our faith

Historically, Buddhism is the world's first missionary religion. It is recorded in the Vinaya that when the Buddha has 60 arhats (full-fledged saints) as his disciples, he sends them out on the "great commission," each going forth in a different direction to spread the good word (*saddhamma*), not so much by their preaching but simply by their peaceful and radiant presence.¹

The new converts to the Buddha's Dharma realize for themselves the true good by renouncing all that is false and bad to become monks and nuns. Some of these converts apparently still keep to some of their old religions or systems.

In other words, what is truly good can be found in all religions and most social and philosophical systems. What divides the religions and systems, even within themselves, is what is bad in them. Unlike other religions, early Buddhism does not use the "power" mode to convert others or to teach the faithful: it is always the "love" mode, that is, accepting others unconditionally.

The "power" mode here often means belief in some powerful or almighty supreme being (if there is ever such a real being). It also means being obedient to those who define such ideas, and being unquestioning members of the group.

On the other hand, as followers of early Buddhism, we are encouraged to discover our own true personal potential for inner joy and the peace of aloneness. It is in our spiritual aloneness that we discover our true self (the greatest good we can be), and with which we can benefit others.

This means that we are empowered to waken others to the same self-realization of which they are themselves capable, that is, of seeing the greatest good in themselves. When we are able to see ourselves as being no different from others in terms of a universal spirituality, we simply break free from the crowd. True conversion, then, is a self-realization of the greatest good we are capable of.

In **the Udumbarikā Sīha,nāda Sutta** (D 25), the Buddha makes an unprecedented "lion-roar" on universal spirituality. A "lion-roar" here refers to a statement that is impossible to be debunked because it is true, and capable of promoting spiritual development and universal peace.

This is the Buddha's spiritual challenge to us: "Let an intelligent person, honest, trustworthy, upright, come to me, and I will instruct him, I will teach him the truth [Dharma]." If he practises what he is taught, then, if he is open, within this life itself (even within 7 days), he will awaken to true liberation.

Note here that we do not use the word "salvation," which suggests an external agency: we ourselves can and must work to liberate ourselves from idea and practices, even religious ones, that imprison and enslave us. "Power" religions disempower us by saying that we are evil or sinners, so that we think we are unable to save ourselves and must depend on them.

The Buddha further declares,

¹ On the story of the meeting between Assaji and Sāriputta, see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, 2004: 5.11 (Śāriputra meets Aśvajit): [link](#).

Let whoever is your teacher remain as your teacher.
Let your rules remain as your rules.
Let your livelihood remain as your livelihood.
Let what you consider unwholesome continue to be so considered.
Let what you consider wholesome continue to be so considered.
—“I do not speak for any of these reasons.”

There are bad things which, if not abandoned, would trouble us and make us suffer, he continues; things that hold us as slaves of the bad, blind to good and feeling unhappiness again and again. “It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach,” declares the Buddha.

If we practise accordingly, these bad things will be abandoned, the states that purify us will increase, and by our own direct knowledge, we will realize, here and now, true liberation. In other words, we can be liberated in this life itself, not by belief, not by prayer, not in the afterlife. And we need not become monks or nuns, nor even be religious about it. We free ourselves of even religion itself.

The sad reality is that religions today are mostly about buildings, money, status, power, and information. Yet, if we carefully search our scriptures (no matter which religion we follow), we will discover something true, beautiful, even liberating. Then, if we open up our hearts a bit more, we find that these beautiful and liberating truths can also be found in almost every other religion.

The shock for many of us is that it is very difficult to find even in our own religion or system – our leaders, teachers, gurus, priests, pastors, or monastics – who actually practise what they preach! We suddenly find ourselves alone, as it were. We are now moving closer to what the great religious founders have themselves faced.

We are, in a way, experiencing Moses’ spiritual aloneness (disillusioned by his unfaithful tribe) before the “burning bush” on Mt Horeb; Christ on the cross on Calvary (rejected by his own close disciples), Prophet Mohammed alone in the cave of Hira’, and the Buddha alone under the bodhi tree at Bodh Gayā (deserted by the 5 monks).

We each need to face our own burning bush, bear our own cross, enter our own cave, and sit under our own bodhi tree. We must trust ourselves in this aloneness: if not, who else can we ever trust (Dh 160)?² We must be courageous in this aloneness.

For, we are born alone, and will die alone. In our best and greatest moments, we are ever alone. The supreme excellence, the greatest beauty, the highest good, the most liberating truth, that we have experienced and that benefit our lives even today have come from those who have the courage to be alone in their drive, creativity, holiness, and liberation.

But why do some of us feel really lonely? (Note that the word here is “lonely,” not “alone”)? We tend to feel lonely if there is something to be lonely about: this something is the “self.” This is some kind of fixed idea about our self and our beliefs (they are not really different): we are what we believe. Such a self is consumed with its own self-interest, so that it feels alienated when it measures itself with others. “Self” says here “I” am: hear me, like me, love me, join me, be me.³

² On Dh 160, see SD 27.3 (3): [link](#).

Yet, when we look deep within ourself, we only see moving moments of thoughts and feelings. Nothing ever remains for more just a tiny moment. Our thoughts flash by faster than the fastest lightning. We simply cannot hold that thought!

And we should not. Our thinking is the breath of our mind. If we do not let our mind breathe freely, then we are as good as dead.⁴ If we let our mind breathe in this way, we will then recall that our views have kept changing over the years, and we see more clearly how things are connected together in our lives. Then we realize that we are linked with every other life around us – or we would, in time.

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³ On how self-centredness arises, see “I: The nature of identity,” SD 19.1: [link](#).

⁴ Further see Reflection, “Breathe Dharma” R324 131225: [link](#).