

The Buddha Smile

If popular religion is anything to go by regarding human behavior, we can rightly surmise that people mostly do not want to think for themselves, and they want quick easy solutions to their problems. They are not even interested in knowing the conditions from which their problems have arisen. If a religion can “solve” their problem (be it a personal issue, an illness, or what have you), it IS the right and true religion. And if it is right and true for me, they think, it must be so for you, too!

If we are a Buddhist keeping to the Buddha’s Teaching, we would highly value understanding how the mind works. For, the mind is the source of all religions, indeed, all our knowledge and everything else. Most importantly, understanding the mind, we can free it from ignorance and suffering -- and from all religions. The free mind does not need religion; for, it is truly peaceful and wise.

To free the mind, we need to KNOW it first. But how do we know our minds? Surely, not by looking into any holy books, or even scientific tomes. We are not looking in the right place. The best way to know the mind is to look into it! And the best way to know our minds is to first learn to keep it still and clear.

A still and clear mind is one that is fully and wholesomely aware of the present moment. This is called mindfulness. The first and easiest thing we can be mindful of is our sufferings, shortcomings, even failures. To be mindful is to accept things as they are, especially to accept our pains and failures, just as we are.

For, if we pretend that these negative things do not exist, they will continue to insidiously haunt us. Being mindful of our sufferings will tell us that we can be better persons, that we have not yet realized our true potential, or at least we should not fall back into the fire. For this reason, Buddhists love dealing with suffering head on.

We often think we do not deserve our sufferings (Why me?). For, if we do, we would not be so much bothered by it. The point is that we should accept our sufferings even though we do not deserve them. This is to show compassion to ourselves. Compassion is to be kind to a person even though he does not deserve it. It is easiest and most important to begin with ourselves. For, if we do not accept ourselves, or worse, hate ourselves, we will end up being either very negatively religious people or violently unreligious people.

Buddhists also know that the Buddha and the great saints have feelings: they feel pain at our greed, hate, pride, stupidity and ignorance. They feel sadness, the ancient texts say,¹ at our unwillingness to learn, at our self-righteous over-confidence, at our self-propelled arrogance. But the Buddha and the saints are not affected by such sadness. This is what allows them to go on teaching and helping others despite everything. This is like a good doctor who is saddened by the pains and loss of his patients, but he keeps on going with a mission.

¹ See “the 3 satipatthanas,” Salayatana Vibhanga Sutta (M 137.21-24/3:221) = SD 29.5.

What have we done that we really deserve any teachings from such wise teachers like the Buddha? But they are compassionate saints. They teach us the Dharma even though we do not deserve it.

One of the unfair demands we often make is: what can Buddhism do for me? Question wrongly put, the Buddha would reply. Rather, we should ask: What can I do for myself? Am I willing to look into my own mind and deal with what is there? Am I able to do this without any external props and promises of power and pleasure? Even if I say that I would like to try, I have taken the first step on the Buddhist path.

Despite dealing with suffering head on, the Buddha is naturally happy. As such, Buddhists, too, are naturally happy. The point is that we need to be naturally happy to be able to deal with suffering, whether our own or those of others. That is why we always see a gentle smile on a Buddha image. This is a reminder to smile gently within ourselves no matter what happens outside of us.

This “Buddha smile” keeps our hearts clear of negative states. Try this for yourself. Do the Buddha smile: gently smile inside yourself. Then examine the issue that is troubling you or confront the negative person. You will be surprised at how resourceful and healing your Buddha smile is.

Then we direct our Buddha smile at others, at home, in a class, at work, in a hospital, in religious place, in public, to anyone we meet. We are beginning to change the world as we know it.

Piya Tan ©2010

14th Apr 2010 rev