

## Quest for meaning

Religion is a system of belief and belief-based practices. Unlike science, religion does not, as a rule, rely on empirical proofs, but on certain fixed ideas handed down from its founders or those who interpret these founders and their teachings. Furthermore, after the founders' death, their teachings, no matter how well recorded, are invariably reinterpreted by those who claim to be teachers and followers.

Understandably, where there are rivalling or contradicting interpretations of the founder's teachings, disparate groups, sects or denominations, would grow. Where there is a struggle for power and domination – this occurs through religious history -- disunity, conflict, even bloodshed, can attend such developments, and have widespread effects on society and history. No religion is free from such shadows. It might even be said that since the beginning of human history, human conflicts and wars were often rooted in religion or belief.

The question now is: why does religion still pervade our lives? The simple answer is: ignorance. We do not have all the answers. Most religions, for example, attribute our existence and the universe to some super-being, a Creator God. This is some kind of invisible being whom no one has really met, but imagined in stories handed down in holy books. There is no way of proving such writings to be true or false. Such is the nature of a faith-based belief system.

We “need” religion because we feel some kind of emotional need that has not been satisfied in other ways. When we are deeply troubled with some problems, losses or disappointments which seem to be overwhelming, we try to understand what it all “means.” The easiest answer seems to attribute this to some kind of external agency, a supreme being, an almighty God.

Just as it is easier to blame someone else for our problems, it is also easy to think that the answer to our life's issues lie outside of us. If we are facing problems, it is obvious that it is a personal experience. Since it is a personal experience, the solution is also within our person, in our mind. This kind of approach can be said to be a “quest for meaning.”

A quest for meaning is an effort in self-understanding. The best place to begin this quest or inner journey, is to ask ourselves: What really is the problem here? If we do not carefully define what is really troubling us, then we have only a hazy helpless idea of unhappiness. We then despairingly hope that religion might help. When we think we are drowning, we would even clutch at an invisible straw.

But a religion is only a system of belief, even a very sophisticated and powerful one. So when we turn to a religion, we are simply adopting a belief or a set of beliefs. Such beliefs can be so sophisticated and powerful that we are distracted, momentarily at least, from our problems. We might even say that our problems have disappeared, or rather they have been swept under the religious carpet.

Our problems have gone “underground”: they have been repressed, sunk deep into our unconscious, so that we are no more aware of them. But they still lurk like shadows behind the light: the brighter the light, the darker the shadows. As long as we are cooped up in the seeming safety of our religious tribe, as shepherded sheep in a proverbial flock, we seem safe. However, when the right (or wrong) conditions arise, we fall back to our old ways of desire, hate, delusion and fear.

So now we need to find someone else to blame. Religion often blames someone called the Devil, the Evil One, and so on. Just as no one has seen the Superbeing, no one has met the Devil, either, except perhaps when we are mentally troubled in a bad way. The devil, in other words, is in the mind. The devil is really in the details, that is, our thoughts.

So if we learn to think straight and clearly, we dispel the devil, so to speak, or we might even convert our devil into a saint. To learn to think wholesomely in this way, we must first calm our minds. The best way to calm the mind is to free it from thoughts, at least momentarily.

## *Quest for Meaning* by Piya Tan

We can do this, for example, by simply and fully observing something beautiful, say a flower, without saying a word. Just “feel” the flower, or a rolling mountain-ringed valley stretching to the horizon under a clear blue sky, or a clear moonless night sky with countless stars.

In all such actions, we will invariably notice that our breaths become gentler and more regular (our heart-rate and blood-pressure slow down, too). We are really at peace with ourselves. In fact, we can do this quite easily almost anywhere. Find a place to sit with some comfort, and just breathe in a most relaxed way. Keep noting each breath “in,” each breath “out.”

We can do this in at least one of two ways (or both). First method: counting each full breath: “in...out...1,” “in...out...2,” “in...out...3,” “in...out...4,” “in...out...5,” and then repeat as often as we feel like doing it. Second method: simply note each in-breath as “in,” each out-breath as “out,” and repeat for as long as we feel like it. Remember it is not how long we sit in meditation, but how well we enjoy it, and to keep our minds thought-free and peaceful for moments at a time.

The benefit of such an inner peace is that we begin to feel truly happy with ourselves. However, this will not last long, especially when we meet someone, usually someone religious, who comes along and tells us that meditation (read mental peace) is dangerous and the “work of the devil”! Who really is the danger, the devil, here?

There is a good way of strengthening ourselves here: we need to see “meaning” in whatever we are doing, even in life itself. This short reflection is unlikely to reveal the meaning of life to us, but we need to start somewhere: now is the moment.

Any time we are at peace, especially at the end of our breath meditation, we should spend some moments asking ourselves the basic question: “What is really going on here?” Do not make any attempt to answer this. At an unexpected moment, especially when we are truly at peace with ourselves, or doing something we really enjoy, or having a still moment in the thick of a problem we have fallen into, the answer simply speaks to us.

We will know what to do (or not to do). No one else can or should do this for us. No one can know us better than we ourselves. Whatever we decide, we have to live with it. We are our own master – who else can be our master? Do not hand over our remote control to anyone else.

A religion that teaches us to take charge of our own lives, as such, is much safer and workable than those that say, come and be saved. They tend to create or point to some non-existent evil or problems, like someone on the internet claiming to have a lot of money, but need only some help from us, and then we will be rewarded with more than the amount we have given! This is preying on our sufferings and gullibility.

Religion and goodness are not always the same thing.

Being religious is not always about being kind; respecting life, our own and that of others, is true kindness.

Being kind is not always about being happy; giving to others so that they are happy with their wholesome needs is.

Being happy is not always about being free; respecting our body and those of others is real freedom.

Being free is not always about being wise; knowing the beneficial and liberating truth is wisdom.

Being wise is not always about being at peace; knowing and freeing the mind is true peace.

[Dedicated to Charles Darwin and the humanist in us.]

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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