

Be true, be free

What are we most afraid of losing? Our views. They often define us, so that without them we feel at a loss, but mostly they limit us. Sometimes someone might feel upset after reading something they disagree with. They think that their pet view has been violated.

Our views, then, are our mental limits; we are limited by our views. Such views have become walls and bars like an evangelist's faith that needs to be reinforced by converting others without any real spiritual, even human, dialogue. It is but a dissociative monologue.

The great irony is that when our views are being threatened, we are really being offered a chance to re-think, to get out of our box for the open space of a higher truth. It is like someone knocking at our egg-shell so that we can break out of it. Our views are but a thin shell, but it stunts us from real growth.

It is never easy to hear the truth, much less to see it, and most difficult to live by that truth. We have the famous story of how the Buddha at first hesitates to teach the Dharma that he has just awakened to.¹ How can the worldly, drowned in craving and blinded by ignorance, understand, much less accept, the Dharma that instructs us to let go of self and views. However, once we have had a true vision of reality, even just a glance, we would not have it any other way, but to pursue that truth and fully awaken to it, be fully liberated.

Even if we must suffer pain and loss to gain such a vision, we would still feel compelled to pursue it. The sufferings and deprivations we might have to face in its course simply remind us that we are on the right track. For these sufferings are echoes of our own old habitual and cyclic ways. The vision of true freedom only throws into clear relief the prison of views and habits we have created for ourselves.

What hinders us from real growth and realizing our true spiritual potential are our own views. Our views are our self-made prison: their invisible bars are unbreakable and we simply fear breaking free because we are not used to being free, not used to being without views. We have never tasted freedom. We forget (or simply do not realize) that all views are provisional.

Some of the most powerful views are religious ones. The noble ancient spiritual teachers did not start religions, but openly taught us to live noble lives, see the truth within ourselves, and so be free. After these teachers' deaths, as more worldly people take over the teachings, they reinterpret and introduce new ideas and ways, simply because they lack the vision and truth of their teachers.

These later preachers and leaders take upon themselves to "modernize" the teachings, to make them more "relevant." Here to "modernize" simply means to break the rules set by the original teacher, especially when every good teacher reminds us to keep to the spirit of their teaching. The "spirit" here means that it is *not* that the teaching must be made relevant, but it is we who have to live *relevantly* to the teaching. The Dharma need not change; we need to change.²

The Buddha's teaching is said to be "timeless" or "time-free" (*akālika*). To modernize it means to tear it out of its timelessness (if that is ever possible), and force it into our own time. The Dharma, especially as an ethical mind-training method, is not a scientific system or economic school that needs to be updated. It is a method of "letting go" that needs to be practised and internalized.

¹ See **Why the Buddha hesitated to teach**, SD 12.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/12.1-Why-the-Buddha-hesitated.pdf>

² However, cultural aspects of the Buddha's teachings may need to be adapted or "indigenized" so that they are relevant to local life, and sutta stories and figures need to be properly interpreted: see eg **Neyy'attha Nī'tattha Sutta** (A 2.3,5+6), SD 2.6b: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.6b-Neyyattha-Nitattha-S-a2.3.5-6-piya.pdf>

What is it that is preventing us from letting go of our views? Clearly, a first reason would be cultural conditioning. If we are raised in a culture that places great emphasis on having money and respecting power, then we would most likely measure the “success” of religion in terms of money and power. Good (or bad) examples here are money Buddhism and mega-churches.

Very often, such cultural conditionings start with our parents or care-givers. To take a ludicrous, but real, example: if a mother or grandmother constantly nannies a child with the jingle, “No money no talk,” we can imagine the kind of values that such a child would almost instinctively live by in adulthood. In fact, this could well be a root of future sufferings, simply because we have confused the means with the end.

We could be conditioned in many other ways, such as by our loved ones, relatives, friends, colleagues, working environment, and of course the mass media. In some cases, we are simply coerced into a belief or value system; or, we might fear losing that bond, or of being alienated. We fear being alone. Fear may be a great motivator, but it is a poor and painful teacher.

The Buddha is the greatest of beings because he is not afraid to give up even his own family and wealth (his world). He is not afraid to be all alone in the world in quest for what is real and true, that which would fully liberate us from our views and fears. This is an important meaning of renunciation we need to reflect on if we value true and healthy freedom.

Indeed, we might find it materially beneficial and meaningful to hold certain values or follow a certain religion. During the colonial period, foreign missionaries who worked in India and China, for example, found that many natives had joined their missions and activities as “rice Christians.” Some Buddhists, too, have the simplistic view that doing meritorious deeds are good because we will gain great riches in return, or that people are rich because of their past good karma (without taking into account present realities).

The most powerful hindrance to our letting go of views must surely be religious conditioning. Such “faith” is reinforced by cultural conditioning and a dominant culture to which we belong or which deeply influences our lives. The “truth” or religions today seem to lie more in their marketing than in their veracity.

Notice how religious ideas are proven by more religious ideas, in turn proven by more religious ideas. These are the leashes that tightly hold us as sheep and goats to the unthinking flock. To rise from such a crowd we need to think and feel for ourselves and constantly ask ourselves the right questions: Why am I a Buddhist (or why am I religious)? What does the Buddha really teach? How do I really become happy?

If we are really free to think and honest enough to ourselves, we might notice that we are all somehow guided, even goaded, by our own greed, hate, delusion and fear. This is a great realization; we have begun to know ourselves, and, by that same token, to know others, too.

Here, greed means not knowing when to stop. Hate is our being averse to failure and pain without learning anything from them. Delusion is seeing something other than what it really is. And fear is letting something external weaken or remove our courage to act wholesomely.

If we stop thinking for ourselves, other would think for us. We really start thinking for ourselves when we begin asking the right questions. Such questions would firstly reveal the false teachers (they often get angry or upset at such questions). The human freedom we enjoy today comes from those who have dared to courageously question even the most sacred of truths so that we become wise and happy. We need to go on questioning with our hearts so that posterity will continue to live and grow freely.

Now, we might have difficulty finding anyone to satisfactorily answer our questions. The best answers, in fact, come to us surprisingly in our moments of inner peace and boundless joy. This joy is so pro-

foundly liberating and empowering that we no more fear to speak our minds, or better, to sing our hearts.

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

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