

On religion, off religion

We need to discern three very important aspects of religion today. There are three ways people use religion: the first is for earning a living; the second, for gaining power and control over others; and the third, working towards awakening. Or, taking religion as a profession, as politics, and as renunciation. Here we shall reserve the second usage of religion for another occasion.

It is not difficult to distinguish between the first and the third uses of religion: the professionals tend to be well dressed or colourfully robed, well titled, and carry an air of mystique or superiority. The true renunciants are not always easy to notice: they dress simply, live simply, and move around so calmly as to be easily missed – unless we are really looking.

By “renunciants” here is not meant those who live ritual lives of “leaving home” but really enjoy comfortable and secure tax-free lives. The true renunciants are those who diligently persevere to cultivate their minds to overcome their emotional frailties and spiritual weaknesses. They are those who are seeking to know and understand themselves. Even a nascent self-understanding is helpful and healing to others who seek their counsel.

As true renunciants, or if we practise renunciation (say, during meditation practice), we see life as changing, unpredictable, becoming other. And we should seek to see a pattern in all this, that is, a pattern of change. Such a pattern is always unsatisfactory, because we simply cannot put a finger on it. Notice how things just keep going after a while. We more or less know what is going to happen, and yet it never ends. And when it does seem to end, we still feel that something is missing. Hence, we understand what is changing and unsatisfactory, in reality, has no essence, no fixed forms, no abiding entity – no self.¹

Since all things change, there is no meaning in religious rituals except what we give them, or better where they remind us of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self, and keep us on an even keel as we struggle in our cocoons of spiritual maturing. But rituals dominate religion today, especially where we are unwilling or unable to see change, unsatisfactoriness or non-self. In other words, in most cases, such rituals delude us with mirages that there are something, even some beings, that are permanent and promising.

Rituals are the tools of the religious professionals. It is a powerful means of keeping us in the loop – the loop of being permanently dependent on these professionals, and of keeping fixed ideas about ourselves and life. Such a fixation blinkers us from seeing beyond our noses. So, instead of a vision of our ability to grow out of our cocoons as liberated beings, we become overly concerned with keeping the status quo, of maintaining ourselves, keeping ourselves just the way we are, or the way a higher power wants us to be. Hence, the professionals see religion is a means of earning a living and maintaining a profitable religious market.

The path of renunciation, as lived and taught by the Buddha, is very simple and literally down to earth. We don't really need much to live a happy life. We comprise earth (hardness, heaviness, resistance, etc), and the earth element is all around us, and in the food we eat. We are mostly water, liquid, and the water element is all around us, and in the liquids we drink. We are fire from day one, burning with life, and the fire element is all around us, and there is heat exchange all the time between us and our surroundings. We are wind, breathing in, breathing out, we store it in our blood, and the wind element, the air, is all around us: we breathe it in, we breathe it out.

¹ When such an experience is very powerful (like the Bodhisattva Siddhattha seeing the first 4 signs), it is called samvega (*samvega*): see [Ariya Pariyesanā Sutta](#) (M 26), SD 1.11 (3.1); also Reflection, “[The 3 D's and beyond](#),” R317, 2013.

We don't need much money, status, learning or power to obtain these four vital elements that constitute our physical being. Yet we cannot hold on to them: we can and must only take them in, and having taken them in, we must give them back. This is called bodily living, or bodily renunciation.

Now, we have a fifth element, that is, space. The more space we have the more happy and creative we are. Early Buddhism has stories of heavens and hells. The heavens are always depicted as being vastly spacious and pleasant. The hells and lower realms are always presented as being stiflingly overcrowded and violent. We can begin to understand why we should not crowd our lives with money, gains, titles, praises and pride. We will never be truly happy.

When we live diligently and wholesomely, we need not worry about money, gains, titles, praises or pride. Our spaciousness itself is joyful. It is a joy that no money, no gains, no titles, no praises, no pride can bring. This is the space of renunciation. If we reflect on this spaciousness and see it as gradually encompassing ourselves, everyone around us, and even this universe itself, then we begin to have a good idea of what nirvana – unconditioned bliss – is like.

To begin with (again), we need to remind ourselves what we are looking for in religion. Often enough, the religious professionals are overly concerned with promoting their views and ways. It is as if all such views and ways are fixed forever. If the universal law of life is change, what is the point of being fettered down with a fixed mind and closed heart? We are only narrowing our lives. No wonder we are not really happy, and need to keep on promoting and perpetuating our views and ways.

We are earth, and the earth around us supports us unconditionally, whether we agree with it or not. The good earth supports all life, human, animal, plant and all beings. It's meaningful to call it mother earth, because it is nurturing and unconditionally so.

We are water, and see how water flows, moving and changing. Heavenly waters, the rains, fall on all alike, whether we deserve it or not. Water wets everyone of us unconditionally, cooling us, slaking our thirst, giving us life. Water purifies us, too, and cleanses all alike, high or low, rich or poor, good or bad.

We are fire, and fire naturally gives warmth and light. Even so, let us naturally and randomly be warm and bright to others, making a good difference in their lives, surprising them with goodness. It has to begin with us, just as warmth and light come from fire.

We are wind, and wind is moving air that cools us and clears the air. May we be like the wind, cooling others, clearing their hearts of unnecessary burdens. Just as the wind is present but unseen, may our thoughts, words and deeds, too, even unseen, touch others to move them with good and joy.

Now, there is a sixth element, that of consciousness. This is our own mind. If we can ever own anything, the mind is the only thing worth having. But our mind is like a child, our inner child. It is often restless, changing, becoming other. We think we have fixed ideas about things, but our minds change more often than we change our clothes. Often, our mind change even as we speak, or even when we are silent, listening to others, or after we have meditated, or not doing anything at all.

Our mind is so precious to us that we should never allow anyone to mess with it. Religion is often a systematic way of messing up our mind. We are often told what is good or what is bad, what is real or what is false, without any really good reason, except faith. In other words, we are told to stop using our own minds. Yet, we can get so caught up with our minds, with thoughts, that we forget to feel, to directly experience what is before and around us. We at once decide someone is wrong or bad, without really listening to him, or considering the conditions that have made him act in a certain way.

But, looking deep into our own minds, we would notice that we are little different from others when it comes to negative emotions. If someone prick us, do we not bleed? If we are tickled, do we not laugh? If

we are poisoned, do we not die? And if we are wronged, shall we not revenge?² As we do, so do others. As others, so do we. So what's the difference?

Finally, our body – the composite of the 4 elements living in its “I”-shaped space – has a shelf-life. Something goes seriously wrong with the body, it stops working, but the mind moves on. Death is the leveller of all – with all the money, status, learning or power we have, we cannot negotiate or bribe the end-maker. We have to leave behind all that we *have*; we bring with us only what we *are*. We move on only with the mental traces of our actions, our karma. Death is our last renunciation. In happily and peacefully letting go of this life, we move on ever closer to nirvana.

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

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² From Shylock's speech – the most beautiful words – in Shakespeare's “Merchant of Venice,” act 3, scene 1.