

Buddhism and mental illness¹

We are seeing the beginnings of Buddhist evangelism and cults in Singapore. By “**Buddhist evangelism**” is meant a simplistic, pietist, triumphalist, even racist, attitude in one’s Buddhism and oneself. “**Cult**” refers to a group devoted to a particular person rather than a broader Dharma teaching. “**Simplistic**” here means that we only need to believe in a certain Buddha or Bodhisattva, even an imaginary, non-historical figure.

Such imaginary figures are taken to be real, just as we are real, that is, as persons. We only need to invoke their names, or make a vow, or practise a certain ritual, and we would be “saved,” or our problems solved. These are clear signs of a cult. None of these teachings have been taught by the historical Buddha, but are, in fact, rejected by him.²

Evangelism and religious zealotry are, of course, not new. The same ideology and practice are found in evangelical Nichirenism, where we only need to recite the name of the Lotus Sutra. Such Buddhisms are clearly not the Buddha’s teachings, but that of a race-based Japanese cult. And in a matter of time, even within a generation, we might have a similar made-in-Singapore cult Buddhism.³

By “**pietist**” is meant showing or encouraging a total faith in a religious figure or practice, as distinct from intelligent investigation and questioning, even to the extent of being emotionally, mystically and zealously pious. Such evangelical Buddhists are essentially teaching, “Believe and be saved!” Religious scholars and psychologists would tell us that this is an interesting reaction, probably rooted in our colonial Christian past, or rooted in some psychological need of the preachers or gurus themselves.⁴

“**Triumphalist**” means a sense of pride, even arrogance, often ostentatious, in the rightness and achievements of one’s faith or form of Buddhism. Say, an evangelical Buddhist preacher teaches how glorious a certain sutra is, how every word and character is right and meaningful. One would also publicly denigrate early Buddhism as being Hinayana, “inferior,” and so on.

Buddhist evangelism, even in its nascent stage, is rooted in **superstition** and **insecurity**, which means that its preachers and followers are also likely to be superstitious and insecure. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines “superstition” as the belief that particular events happen in a way that cannot be explained by reason or science, or that particular events or things bring good or bad luck.⁵ Or, that one tends to look for “signs” and interpret them as endorsing or authenticating one’s words, or even oneself.

If reasoning is used here, then, it is a misunderstanding or wrong view that “there is a reason for everything,” and that “reason” is a single external cause behind any act or event. As each and everyone of us would have our own reason for whatever that has happened, it is a “per-

¹ Mental illness can arise and do arise from any kind of religion. Here, I am focusing on the area I am most familiar with and concerned about.

² On how Guanyin “exists” as compassion, see Reflection “[Who really is Guanyin?](#)” R32, 2008.

³ See esp **Cult Buddhism**, [SD 34.5](#). On other dangerous cults, see <http://www.therichest.com/rich-list/most-shocking/10-of-the-most-dangerous-religious-cults/>.

⁴ See eg [SD 24.10b](#) (2) Defence mechanisms.

⁵ See [SD 40a.8](#) (5.2 + 5.4.2).

sonal truth” or “private reality” (*pacceka,sacca*). Such views can, however, be compelling, especially when preached by the charismatic, enforced by the powerful, or sponsored by the wealthy. Then, it becomes more widely held as “view-truths” (*ditṭhi,sacca*) or “view-based truths,” because they are based on our views.⁶

Like their God-believing counterparts, Buddhist evangelists, too, tend to speak of “demons” in their preachings. Such mind-made ideas are treated as being palpably real, just as you and I are real. Although informed Buddhists would disregard such false teachings, even strongly object to them, those new to Buddhism, whose first encounter is with such evangelical preachers, might mistake this wrong view to be Buddhist truth.

The serious problem here is that if people with emotional problems are taught such false views, it would contribute to a new dimension of delusion, or even worsen their problems. I have occasions to counsel members from evangelical churches who were intelligent enough to admit that their severe work stress worsened into their actually seeing various kinds of demons. And they confided that their pastors had put these ideas into their heads. The Buddhist evangelists are beginning to do this, too, that is, confusing their audience with stories of demons and ghosts, instead of explaining the nature of the mind and belief.⁷

Those who have attended any Buddhist evangelical gathering or given feedback from those who have attended such gatherings, would notice that such Buddhist evangelists tend to be self-righteous introverts. Even in a crowd of Buddhists, they tend not to freely chat or have small talk with any one. When one of them was asked why he was not so “friendly” with others, including with other Buddhist teachers, he answered, “If anyone wants to talk, let him come to me first!”⁸

Our main concern here should be mental health and how the wrong kind of public Buddhist teaching can contribute to mental problems in due course. If we address this most serious issue in its nascent stage, then we may be able to nip it in the bud. Otherwise, we are only adding more fuel to a serious mental health problem that will plague us on an ever greater scale, whether we know it or not.

In my four decades of spiritual counselling, I have on many occasions had to counsel people troubled by religious guilt and serious anxiety problems because of being forced to go to church or religious centres, or to believe in certain dogmatic teachings. Parents would force their children to confess their “sins”; they were threatened with hell-fire; and warned that God was “watching” them, and so on.

Such problems are said to be “iatrogenic.” This refers to problems, especially mental illness, contributed, even initiated, by those who are supposed to heal others. One of the most common causes of such mental illness is unhealthy religious teaching by preachers and the wrong understanding by followers. Such preachers probably have mental issues themselves. Often, this is only discovered when the damages are far advanced. Hence, we need to detect the signs early, warn others about them, and avoid gurus and cults like the plague.

⁶ See **Paṭilīna Sutta** (A 4.38) + [SD 43.10 \(1.2\)](#).

⁷ On the evolution of the pretas (“ghosts”), see [SD 48.1](#) (6.4); also (5.2.4).

⁸ For a study of monastic and lay cult figures, see Piyasilo, [Charisma in Buddhism](#), Malaysia, 1992:113-137.

Such preachers easily gather a following of those who, for various reasons, would admire them. Such crowds are likely to transfer their needs for succour and security onto such power-figures.⁹ In other words, such preachers often become cults in themselves. And I suspect, we would see at least a couple of new Buddhist cults in our midst within our own generation.

A cult in our midst today is that of Geshe Michael Roach, a western Tibetan monk, expelled from the Gelug order, and self-proclaimed enlightened Bodhisattva, and writer of “The Diamond Cutter” (an application of the Diamond Sutra to business). In 1998, (still a monk) he married Christie McNally (20 years his junior) in a Christian ceremony (to “honour his Christian heritage”). He declared her to be a Tantric deity, Vajrayogini, who (according to Vajrayana) is believed to be able to transform ordinary experiences into high religious paths.

In 2009, Roach and McNally separated, and she married Ian Thorson in 2010. In 2012, Roach expelled them for violating training rules within his retreat in Diamond Mountain, Arizona. The couple secretly camped within the retreat boundary, where their “practice” included bizarre rituals and violent acts. In April 2012, Thorson died of dehydration in a cave, and McNally barely escaped dehydration herself.¹⁰

Are we waiting for such tragic madness to happen in our midst? Most of us are new and young to Buddhism. Hence, we are very vulnerable to evangelist gurus and their attractive preachings. We must return to the safety of the historical Buddha’s teachings. The early suttas are full of safeguards against such self-view and cultish aberrations. Such safeguards only work when we depend on ourself to learn the Dharma, and keep a healthy, happy mind. When we place our remote control into the guru’s hand, then disaster is sure to follow.¹¹

Important reminder: We need to detect the signs of cultism early, warn others about them, and avoid gurus and cults like the plague – before it is too late, when we have lost a child, a friend, someone we care about, or even ourself. Always follow the teaching, the Dharma, not the teacher.¹²

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

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⁹ On psychological transference, see **Gadrabha Samaṇa Sutta** (A 3.81), [SD 24.10b](#) (2.1).

¹⁰ Leslie Kaufman, "[Making Their Own Limits in a Spiritual Partnership](#)". The New York Times 15 May 2008; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/us/mysterious-yoga-retreat-ends-in-a-grisly-death.html>

¹¹ On other Buddhist cult behaviour and their dangers, see **Bad friendship**, [SD 64.17](#).

¹² See **The teacher or the teaching?**, [SD 3.14](#).