

## **Believing nothing**

“I discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something which has no form and no color – something which exists before all forms and colors appear ... No matter what god or doctrine you believe in, if you become attached to it, your belief will be based more or less on a self-centered idea.” — Attributed to Shunryu Suzuki<sup>1</sup>

Suzuki is right: I do not believe that what he says here is completely right or true. He starts by saying that we should believe in “nothing.” Then, he immediately contradicts himself in the very second sentence by saying that “we have to believe in something ...”! Nothing has become something – now, that’s Zen. At first, we find such mind-messing really fun; then, we have to look for some food, and get our laundry washed.<sup>2</sup>

The Zen masters are not as good at mind-messing as the Indian gurus – notice that it takes the Buddha himself to be really honest and courageous to warn us against such gurus that he was so familiar with in his own time.<sup>3</sup> Mind-messing cults go back to even before the Buddha’s time.

Maybe it’s the Indian languages (such as Sanskrit), which are notorious for their hyperboles and over-statements. What can be said in a single word, is be put into a million, as many (or as much) as the Ganges sand! We only need *one* Buddha, and the suttas, too, state that there can and need to be only *one* buddha in our universe.<sup>4</sup> Mainly because we cannot deal with the Buddha’s death, we have come up with countless zillions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.

Again here we see words as a drug, which makes some people high. Any ex-cult believer who has been fortunate to exit with his mind intact will tell us this, and more. Hence, this is really good advice from early Buddhism: Don’t let anyone mess up our mind!<sup>5</sup>

Does the Buddha tell us to “believe in nothing”? To believe *in* nothing is based on a notion called “annihilationism” (*uccheda, diṭṭhi*). In simple terms, even to say that there “is” nothing, is to declare that it “exists.” The notion of “nothing” exists in our mind: it is a view based on non-existence. Such an idea, in contradicting “belief in something,” is itself dependent on that very idea. So we are caught in a net of views.

The point is that, without understanding the Dharma, we cannot help but “believe” in something, until we find something better or have a better understanding of things; then, we let go of that belief and turn to another. In fact, this is what we have been doing since we were born: we have been giving up views we see as wrong and see the world in new light, often clearer than before. We become wiser this way.

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<sup>1</sup> Zen hereditary priest and teacher of the Soto Zen school (1901-1971), author of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, Tokyo, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> To keep the record straight, I don’t hate Zen, and love much of its teachings, and have friends who are Zen teachers and practitioners. Amongst friends, beliefs should not matter, but the truth should. Notice that the writing style here, too, is Zen-like.

<sup>3</sup> See eg **Sāmañña,phala Sutta** (D 2,16-32), [SD 8.10](#).

<sup>4</sup> **Bahu,dhātuka Sutta** (M 115,14), [SD 29.1a](#).

<sup>5</sup> See eg **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (A 3.65), [SD 35.4a](#).

That is, until we find religion, which often tries to stop us from thinking for ourselves, and wants us to believe *in* something or *in* nothing! The Buddha, on the other hand, teaches us to *believe* nothing, that is, *not* to believe anything, or *in* anything, but to investigate and verify the truth and the reality of things for ourselves. How can we see or awaken if we do not open our eyes?<sup>6</sup>

Religious teachers who have worked with their religion long enough will realize that an overwhelming percentage of their religion's followers simply want something to believe *in*, coming from someone in authority, or from leaders of some social status or academic qualification or some affluence. At some point, the teacher or leader would have to decide whether to use their followers' faith, gullibility or desperation to their advantage (and so become a "cult guru"), or to educate them to become more socially and spiritually mature individuals and a wholesome community that does not measure anyone by their status, looks, title, wealth, learning, or power. The latter way is very much more difficult path, but more desirable in the long run. It is the path taken by the Buddha himself – one against the currents (*paṭisotā, gāmī*).<sup>7</sup>

When, as Dharma teachers, we decide to go against such a "crowd Buddhism," we are likely to find ourselves rejected by the leaders and powers behind the crowd.<sup>8</sup> We would often be sent to Coventry or be blackballed. Yet, all this is worth it, if we truly love the Dharma and wish to live with a Dharma-hearted conscience. More importantly, our lives will be well lived in the true service of the Dharma so that posterity is free from the shadow of the crowd, and find a clearer path to the historical Buddha's teachings.<sup>9</sup>

If Buddhism continues to be faith-based, teacher-centred and ritual-centred – being a sort of feudalistic<sup>10</sup> form of faith – a common trend today in Buddhism in Singapore and Malaysia – then we are not likely to attract the more educated and Dharma-inclined seekers. Faith-based Buddhism also tends to be tribal (even racist), exclusive and intolerant. Hence, they are highly unlikely to attract thinking Buddhists or educated seekers.

Such thinking and educated individuals might turn to other more open groups, such as the Singapore Unitarian-Universalists, which started in Singapore on 23 June 2009. The Unitarian Universalists are an open "Church" that takes no stand on any God-idea, and "welcome individuals regardless of race, gender, age, nationality, religious background, sexual orientation or political beliefs." Amongst their members are open-minded seekers, such as atheists, humanists, Christians, Buddhists and members of other religions or of none.<sup>11</sup> The Unitarian Universalist congregations affirm and promote the following principles:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

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<sup>6</sup> See **Apaṇṇaka Sutta** (M 60), [SD 35.5](#).

<sup>7</sup> See [SD 34.5 \(3.1\)](#).

<sup>8</sup> My context is, of course, Singapore and Malaysia of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, but this reality may well apply to other Buddhist situations, esp in ethnic or cult Buddhisms. See **Cult Buddhism**, [SD 34.5](#).

<sup>9</sup> A Dharma worker should always reflect on the lone radiant Buddha sitting under the Bodhi-tree. See Reflection R409, "[When the sitting gets tough](#)," 2015.

<sup>10</sup> See Reflection, "[Good heavens](#)," R136, 2010.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.uusingapore.org/>.

- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society.

In the 1990s, there arose in the US, **the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship** (UUBF).<sup>12</sup> After a slow but steady growth, they held the Convocation 2015 with Stephen Batchelor (20-22 March 2015) at the Garrison Institute, Garrison, New York. The Convocation theme was “After Buddhism: Recovering the Dharma for a Secular Age.”

The aspiration of the Convocation was stated as follows: “By returning to the earliest texts of the Buddhist canon, we will seek to clarify the distinctive vision of Siddhattha Gotama before it evolved into the orthodoxy of an institutional religion.”<sup>13</sup> This is also the aspiration of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship – and surely that of any Buddhist who is serious about the Dharma as taught by the historical Buddha.

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

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<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian\\_Universalist\\_Buddhist\\_Fellowship](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unitarian_Universalist_Buddhist_Fellowship).

<sup>13</sup> The Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship (UUBF): <http://uubf.org/wp/>.