

Why the hell?

In the Reflection, “What the hell” (R427, 2015), I wrote about why religion today rarely speak about hell(s), and preachers and the religious even less threaten their believers with hell-fire. The operative word of that Reflection is fear. It does not work – or it does not work *any more* – to use the fear of hell to speak of religion, much less as a reason for the existence for religion.

The reason is simple enough: we do not see much manifestations of “hell” in our daily lives, except for media reports on some terrible war or mass murder somewhere in another place, another country. Even if such disasters and tragedies may have occurred where we live, we often find that people are now more unified by common sense, enough common sense any way, to respond with wit and gut to help those affected.

The idea of hell – rather, the reality of hell – is what actually makes us more human (better, kinder) and less religious (praying, believing) today, as we become more aware of differences, that we are of different faiths and life-styles: we are human but it is not a *race*. We simply must take the time to accept this for a sane and fun society to be possible. We also know that religion – the will to possess, dominate, even destroy – is the real threat to our peace and prosperity, not the lack of religion. In fact, most of the significant sufferings reported in the media today are likely to be rooted in some religious teacher rather than any teaching. Religion is just a convenient tool for their violent minds and motives.

We can even say that today – with better education, more political freedom and greater affluence – we tend to see religion less of a social force, as we did before and during the church-inspired colonial age (15th-20th centuries). Religion today is more of a personal choice and private practice – and for the crafty indolent, an easy means of crowd-funding by preaching a money gospel or prosperity faith. In fact, the best model today for understanding religion – including Buddhism (its relevance, success and direction) – is the business model. Religion is good business.

Despite the new relevance of religion and Buddhism today, human suffering continues as before, only now we know it better, perhaps. Understandably, religions today are exploiting human suffering in even more sophisticated ways, often using it as a currency for its authenticity and superiority. But love, compassion, joy and peace have no religion; they don’t need any other name. They are best lived just the way they are, within ourself and we freely sharing it with others. Even without religion, but with wisdom, we can and must be loving, kind, joyful and peaceful.

Even as the world climate and environment grow more whacky and wild, we are still more concerned about church and religious membership, about “God’s plan,” or going to Western Paradise (interestingly the “west” has always been an attractive place in Asian Buddhism), than how our fellowmen, society and world are faring.

Like sex, religion today, too, is the most selfish of human acts. If that were the case, then it would surely help that we should go back to basics, get down to what religion – or at least, early Buddhism – is really all about. After over 50 years of religion and Buddhism, I’ve learned from observation and personal experience that early Buddhism is the best we have if we are looking for a path that is truly spiritual, yet non-religious.

Early Buddhism speaks loudly of hell. But not only hell: more often, the early texts speak of “the animal birth and hell.” The ancient Pali that has preserved early Buddhism for us in a very versatile language that richly conveys to us what can only be narrowly and “exactly” presented to us in English. It is even more difficult to understand and present early Buddhism in Chinese: it is like trying to put together a pastiche or patchwork of little broken coloured mirrors of pictographs. What we get is something very rich and real, but only in its own way.¹

Only after we have understood how words tend to be little mirrors reflecting our own views and biases, that we will start to see early Buddhism for ourself. This is mainly because the early Buddhist teachings – the most complete records we have of the historical Buddha’s teachings – are really a set of challenges against our most dear assumptions of life and the most imaginative images that we have of ourselves.

Like predictable animals (they can be utterly lovable for this), we gravitate to preachers who speak our language and our minds. We rarely look for the truth (not many of us actually dare to look at it in the eye), but would rather settle for a good-looking preacher, especially a single monk or nun, or even an eligible lay teacher. They seem available, and brimming with vim and wisdom. This is the religion of the herd and tribe. We feel safe being part of a crowd, accepted and approved by others. Everything seems all right, then, whatever the consequences.

Hell, too, is a crowd. Indeed, it is the most crowded place in our imagination. For many, indeed most, of us, the imagination is more real than the world around us. This is the lightning rod that attracts the most crafty of preachers: they easily hurl their bolts of faith and fancy down our erect antennas, and we are struck down relentlessly with the same faith and fancy. We have joined the growing grinding crowd. This is the religion of the crowd: it is a hell of a faith.

We tend to take “hell” in the last sentence as meaning “great, the best of something.” This is what actually attracts us to a crowd religion – a false sense of safety in numbers, of being socially significant, of dominating others. Yet, we often forget – indeed, it has probably never occurred to us – that heaven is the most beautifully spacious place we can imagine. We can never find such a place in space-time reality because *time* defines that space: it is impermanent.

We can only begin by visualizing the spaciousness of heaven in our lovingkindness practice. For that reason (amongst many other good ones), lovingkindness is also called “boundless love” or unconditional acceptance. Lovingkindness is also the first, the foundation, of the 4 divine abodes: lovingkindness, compassion, gladness and equanimity.

“Hell,” then, is not a place we go to or get sent to, but it comes to us like a con-man in broad daylight, and we do not even know it. We’ve got used to it, like being born into a crowded island prison, and we don’t want to get off, even when we have the opportunity to do so.² And when we see heaven, perchance, we find it too open, too spacious, too peaceful. We’ve become animals and hell-beings, used to our paths and pens, always coming home to roost, waiting for our turn at the master’s hands and mouth.³ Perhaps, we can start being kind to our pets.

¹ On the problem of language in understanding religion, see Reflection, [Freeing Buddhism from words](#), R462, 2016.

² See Reflection, [Everything is beautiful – really?](#) R230, 2012.

³ See [Saṃsappanīya Pariyāya Sutta](#) (A 10.205), SD 39.7.

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