

Rituals and vows¹

Our mind is all that is, that we are and have, to begin with. “Our mind is all that is” means that whatever effectively exists for us is not the world out there, but what we perceive of that world. “(Our mind is all) that we are” means that our real world are the experiences of our own 5 senses and the mind. “(Our mind is all we that we) have” means that our mind creates a sense of “self,” something apparently identifiable and appears permanent, so that we can own it, or at least crave for it. “To begin with” means that our personal development and transformation must begin with our mind and in our mind. It all begins there and must end there, too.

Our search for the true answer to life’s hard questions must begin at the start and source—the mind (see Dh 1-2). When we try to look for this answer anywhere else, in another person, in some outside agency (God, gods, Buddha, demons, etc), we will sooner or later be left high and dry on the rock of doubt. We have created doubt by looking in the wrong way and at a false mental object. The reality is that there is no **doubt**, except what we have projected for ourselves.

Those of us who are still caught up with some ideas of an abiding self or harbouring some hope for the security and succour of such a self, must suffer from some doubt in our own ability and necessity for self-effort and awakening. Indeed, if awakening is possible, who else is there to awaken except we ourselves. The blinding power of such desire and doubt is simply so overpowering that we are pushed into **a rut of rituals and vows** seeking succour and salvation.

Repetitions of tasks, such as prayer or petitioning to sacred and holy images, give us a sense of familiarity, and, hence, some promise of permanence in contempt of a world that is constantly changing. We only need to open our eyes and look around. Most of us are neither willing nor able to open our eyes nor to look beyond our noses. When we do open our eyes, we are simply unable to make out the memes² and mirages before us. So, we believe what we see, or we are told to believe so that we might see what we want to believe or must believe. This is religion.

There are captivating rituals and liberating rituals. Captivating rituals are those that excite the senses rather than still the heart.³ Rituals of reciting the Buddha’s names or mantras of deities give us a sense of power and euphoria. Rituals accompanied by some kind of attire, gestures, movements, music and noise, indulge and excite our senses, which is taken to be some holy communication or sacred presence. Such rituals are good if they transform our lives to be more keenly attentive and responsive to those before us, and sustain our inner harmony after the fact. They are merely addictive and distractive if they merely help us to forget our woes and wounds that need proper and direct tending and healing.

Ritual disassembles and limits goodness and kindness so that they are only meaningful or useful to the performer. The audience can only stare and starve in wonderment, trust with mere

¹ This is a slightly expanded version of [section 1.2.4.3](#) of the introduction to **the Dutiya Asappurisa Sutta** (S 45.26), [SD 47.3a](#).

² See **Memes**, [SD 26.3](#).

³ On the “arousal” effect of visualization exercises and the “relaxation” effect of Theravada meditation, see eg Ido Amihai & Maria Kozhevnikov, “Arousal vs relaxation: A comparison of the neurophysiological and cognitive correlates of Vajrayana and Theravada meditation practices,” *Plos One*, 2014.

hope, while waiting for the performers to stop and free themselves from the strange cage of sounds and gestures to be back in the real world, to be truly human, so that we communicate and work together to better ourselves and the world. Kindness is not a religion, and can never be a ritual. Compassion is a random act of kindness, especially to those who do not deserve it.

Meaningful vows. Vows can give us a strong and meaningful drive if we need to do something wholesome, or heal some unwholesome situation. However, religious vows of “saving the world,” “liberating all beings,” or invoking “world peace,” are often merely casual and callous words of the unthinking and uncaring. They have never worked, except as ways to bush our wine,⁴ a religious marketing ploy to impress the gullible and attract the pious.

Drinking too much wine intoxicates us. Indeed, religious intoxication – the belief that divine prayers and answers are more real than actual personal effort in transforming ourselves and helping others in their times of real needs – is an unholy excuse for allowing others to languish in their karma instead of helping them to turn around their conditions or teaching them how to alleviate themselves.

Liberating rituals are those that are expressions of our heart’s joy or unconditional love for others or a vision of true reality, such as bowing before another with lotus-palms reminding him of his potential for good and self-awakening, or bowing before a Buddha-image to rejoice in the presence of the Dharma in this very day on account of the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion.

In this sense, meditation is a liberating ritual. We repetitively direct our mind, fixing it on a mental object, say the breath or lovingkindness. It is liberating in that we feel our mental energies more focused and more spacious within our heart, so that we are filled with zest fruiting in stillness. Then, we rise above ritual, and have a real and direct experience of our mind freed from its encumbering worldliness.

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

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⁴ From the proverb, “Good wine needs no bush.”