

Revisioning Buddhism 9

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

Mental slavery

A situation where one is deprived of personal freedom and is forced to serve another is *slavery*. But worse than bodily slavery is *mental slavery*, when we are so conditioned by a person, a group, an idea or an ideology that we are unable to think for ourselves to the extent of being unable to distinguish right from wrong, and from acting rightly. We remain mental slaves when we are *ignorant* of the true causes of the problems and sufferings, or when we are *deluded* with persons, events and ideas in our lives.

We are moved by charisma¹ and nose-led by memes.² **Charisma** is our perceiving someone we admire for any reason, as a result of which we attribute various qualities, especially, authority, power (including magical powers), holiness (such as sainthood) and other qualities. We are likely think that such a person is always right, and we often unquestioningly obey such a person into doing anything.

We often attribute charisma to a monastic, religious leader or anyone we admire on account of their speaking ability, the way they dress (monastic robes), titles (Ven Dr, PhD), looks (handsome, pretty), and other traits or features they have that we regard as desirable. Furthermore, the charisma is enhanced when such an admired person lives in a large and impressive temple or building, or is of a certain race, or controls a lot of funds, or has great influence, and so on.

Such ideas and external features are known as **memes**. And memes have only one purpose: to replicate themselves and overwhelm everything else. Charisma and memes combine into a very lethal weapon in our surrounding our minds to others, so that we become merely a cog or wheel in that system, and our remote control is handed over to the person we admire or take as our master. We have been mentally enslaved by that guru or cult!

We are easily enslaved by others through charisma and memes. The best protection and immunization against them is *wisdom* and *emotional independence*. Wisdom arises through a deep understanding of the Buddha's true teachings (such as the Suttas) and emotional independence comes from being truly happy deep inside yourself so that you do not need to rely of an external source of succour. This is best done through proper and good meditation.

The most important and difficult task in Buddhist work is the mental liberation of the person. Ideas, even Dharma teachings, are tools for liberating the mind. No matter well we think of Buddhism at the moment, we must tell ourselves that this is only provisional knowledge, a step to even higher and clearer Dharma. As long as we keep an open mind to the Dharma, and a close mind to evil, we will truly see the impermanence and unsatisfactory states of persons, situations and things, and not be cheated by them. As we focus on such a vision, we grow closer to self-awakening in this life itself.

¹ See Piyasilo, *Charisma in Buddhism*, 1992h: http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/charisma6.pdf.

² See **Memes** = SD 26.3: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.3-Memes-piya.pdf>

Mental Slavery by Piya Tan

Part of our spiritual growth comes from seeing the suffering of others and the dangers that threaten the Dharma. We have to put in committed and consistent effort in Dharma-inspired education and social work. Such efforts towards personal liberation must be tempered by an understanding of social realities. We need to use our wisdom, skillful means, patience, wholesome networking and, above all, set a good example and inspiration for others, as the great saints of the Buddha's time have done.

[Source: Piya Tan, **The Person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b (7.4), © 2009. For full essay, see: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.6b-The-person-in-Buddhism-piya.pdf>