

Buddhist agnosticism

After nearly 50 years of seeking and studying religion and ending up choosing to practise Buddhism, I have given up all forms of Buddhism except early Buddhism, with which I have been living for nearly 2 decades now. Why stand in the shadows of foreign cultures and exotic cults when we can bask in the bright healthy sunshine of early Buddhism?

As I study more of the early Buddhist texts more closely—translating and analyzing them, and writing modern commentaries on them—I find that I am beginning to know less and less, but understanding ever better. It's like learning a language. At first you read the primer, then the grammars, conversations, essays and debates. But when you have mastered the language, you simply enjoying communicating with people, or delving into the wealth of its literature, drama and meditations. You begin to love the culture and the people. So, it is for me with the Buddha Dhamma.

Last frontier

As I understand more of the Buddha Dhamma, I realize that there is one last frontier to explore. Now that I am better prepared, I constantly look within my heart to see joy and open my mind to see wisdom. But all this is only possible with understanding the peace and light of the Dhamma. There is nothing to know, but everything to understand.

How little we know, if anything, when we do not really understand the suttas. Then we form schools, sects and cults. We advance academic theories and philosophical views, just right for us, which may even put us on some pedestal. But the bottom line is that we are looking for attention, wealth and even power. What a rush it is to stand before a listening crowd as we deliver our teaching to them. Yet, we are the blind talking to the blind about the light. We have no love for the Dhamma.

At this point in my life, I feel I am beginning just to regain my sight. I was myopic and purblind, but now see better—thanks to the Dhamma. But I have yet to fully understand what I see. And to fully master how I feel what I see, and to fully see what I feel.

Not awakened yet

All I can be sure of now is that I am not yet awakened to the liberation of the Buddha and the arhats. I don't know really know what it is like to be awakened. Oh yes, I can speak volumes, write volumes about it; and I have. But I still have to awaken to what the Buddha and the arhats have awakened to. Of this I am more certain than ever before.

As far as I understand early Buddhism, (to rephrase T H Huxley), it simply means that I shall not say I know or believe that for which I have no grounds for professing to understand or believe.

So, I must conclude—since I am not awakened yet—that I do not fully understand everything about early Buddhism. Knowing a lot is not the same as understanding it, as being liberated by it. At least, I can say that I am not enslaved to such knowledge: I am ready to change or refine them where I am certain that I am wrong and doubtful.

Hence, I must admit that I am right now an agnostic, a Buddhist agnostic. I say “Buddhist” because I feel it is all right, even beneficial, for us to say, “I don’t know.” Or better, “I know what the Buddha says but I don’t yet understand what he means.” I have yet to realize it for myself, to wake up from my existential slumber.

Deep agnosticism

Let us then be like newborn babes: we are all born atheistic or at least agnostic. That is, until we are raised in fear of an imaginary Being and burdened with Sin—all because we speak words.

Then, we are taught about "I," "me" and "mine"; about "us" and "them." There are “atheists”—the word exists—because the religious and believers want to define non-believers as “outside” of their tribe or cult. They got it all backwards.

Agnosticism is the willingness to embrace the fundamental bewilderment of a finite, fallible being as the basis for living a life that no longer clings to the superficial, even false, consolations of certainty. This is a great preparation and foundation for investigating and experiencing early Buddhism.

Russell on agnosticism

An agnostic, says Bertrand Russell (“What is an agnostic,” 1953), suspends judgement, saying that there are no sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial. At the same time, an agnostic may hold that the existence of God, though not impossible, is very improbable. He may even hold it so improbable that it is not worth considering in practice. In that case, he is not far removed from atheism.

Simply, this means to keep an open mind, open to wisdom, that is. Wisdom drops by drops, but it fills our empty vessel full, silencing the sounds and noises we have been so proud of. This is the heart of Buddhism for the unawakened.

An open mind

As long as our mind is wisely open (not open to everything but understanding nothing), but to be wisely open, to be ready to listen, we are ready to learn and live the light that shines from that wisdom. This is what happens whenever I gaze into the suttas, translate them, reflect on them, meditate on them with joy, clarity and peace.

When we gaze deeply and long enough into the suttas, the Dhamma gently gazes back at us. Then, we see more of not “who” but what we truly are—not a projection but a real person, a true reality.

From this understanding comes the courage to face what is real and true, and to accept them unconditionally. We now have the courage to step into that living and moving path of awakening. The path moves us, and moving on, we must leave behind our self-views, our doubts, our superstitious rituals and vows.

We are ready to approach and meet the Buddha.

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