

Beyond religion (Part 2 of 3)

Knowing, taming and freeing the mind
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Purpose

The Buddhist life begins with moral training: understanding the basic nature of our body and mind. Our first or basic purpose is to **mindfully** restrain or discipline our body so that we can exist and grow with others. Our mind gives us this **moral purpose** which allows a good society to exist and flourish.

Not all other religions see moral purpose as being in our own mind or heart, as being **within** ourself. Most religions tend to see that purpose coming from **outside** of us, from some external agency, which they usually call **God** or some universal essence.

In important ways, they believe that we have no choice but to be an instrument of that God-given purpose. The Buddha rejects such a wrong view: we are our own refuge and saviour (Dh 160, 380).

My God is best?

There is a vital difference between these two ways of religious or purposeful thinking. In the God-system, “man proposes, God disposes.” We are ultimately responsible only to God, or more specifically, **our** God. Often enough, we conceive such a God as being all-loving, at least to us, at some strategic time, that is, when it favours us.

One serious disadvantage with this way of religious thinking is that we do not feel accountable for any bad, harm or violence we show others, especially to those who do not follow **our** God. In fact, some even feel it is their sacred duty to remove or exterminate any such aberrations and distractions.

This has been at the root of religious wars for centuries, killing millions of innocent lives, even amongst the most “civilized” of us, especially so because we have better techniques and better weapons of mass destruction to spread and defend our Faith. Such was Europe's 30 Years' War (1618-1648) between the Catholic Christians and Protestant Christians; 8 million people, all supposedly Christian, died as a result.

Karma and mind

Early Buddhism teaches karma, intentional action which arises in our own minds. It is not always easy to have **good** intentions, especially in the face of pains that arise from outside of us, from others, as we see it. However, teaches the Buddha, with moral training, we can prevent **negative** intentions from arising and acting in unwholesome ways.

Moral intention, at its best, allows us to live and let live. This is, in fact, what moral living basically means. To instil better quality in our lives, we need to **cultivate the mind**, since our intentions arise from there. The mind tends to see mostly causes and effects [Part 1]. We

need to use our **heart** to arouse positive emotions so that, by our example, our life and those of others, can at least be human, or better, become **more than human**: we become divine, supremely good, here and now.

Not god, but godliness

All religions have some idea of the “divine life.” For most, this comes after death; or this can arise now if and only if we belong to the same **tribe** with its own building or space for prayer and faith. In this Tribal System of religion, moral conduct and purpose are defined by those who are “above” us, those more powerful or “holier” than we are.

Although such authority is claimed to have come from some Holy Scriptures, these are merely words, or The Word, which needs to be interpreted by those who speak for God, that is, the most powerful amongst us.

The Buddha rejects such a God-centred class-structured I-Thou tribal religion as being too “inward looking,” self-centred, even Self-propelled. He rejects the idea of any kind of eternal Self or cosmic Other (some kind of universal essence) as being purely imaginative, exploitative and destructive. We can see all these negativities in religion, even today.

The divine life

Rejecting a tribal, self-centred, after-death idea of **Divinity**, the Buddha teaches the divinity of goodness and awakening **here and now**. The best and highest kind of God we can and should conceive is that of pure love, ruth,* joy and peace, goodness at all levels, in all its forms. Since these are qualities, Godliness or godliness, if you like, we can and must all cultivate them.

*[**Ruth** is Middle English for compassion, but only “ruthless” is used today. It's good to bring back the good side of this beautiful word.]

Ruth

Love is the unconditional acceptance of all life, all that live. We begin by accepting people just as they are. Then, we notice they are lacking in some ways. We understand that when we lack love, we fall into bad ways, and tend to see what we lack as pain and punishment. We should show them **ruth**, compassion. We should be kind to them, give them a helping hand to stand on their own, whether they deserve it or not. Love breeds ruth.

Joy

To coexist with other beings, we must feel and show **joy**, peace, above all, good, towards them. Rejoicing in their goodness, we feel good; then, we are good, too. Good, then, is an active way of seeing and acting beyond the self that limits our minds and darkens religion.

Yet, despite all our efforts and goodness, so much of the world still falls into pain and suffering. We alone can never completely remove the world's suffering. We begin to

understand that this is the way of the world, a cyclic reality of opposites: joy and pain, good and bad. We learn to be at peace with that. In that peace, that cycle does not exist, that is, for as long that there is that peace.

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