

## **Buddhism anti-social?**

An alternative out of the rat-race and religion  
[Previously published as fb191213 piya]

A common but false accusation by others about early Buddhism is that it is **anti-social**. This is clearly a desperate slander to knock down a system of teaching and practice that works very well in our world. In fact, the term “anti-social” is often a code or slang simply meaning: We don’t know why the Buddhism of the Buddha is growing in popularity even when we (those hostile to Buddhism) are the “only true religion” and have use so much resources, funds and power to convert others?

When we look at other **ethnic or worldly** forms of Buddhism, their monks and nuns are certainly engaged with the world. They follow no Vinaya (their laity is forbidden from knowing it since they do not observe it), and live according to their worldly needs and wants. What could be more worldly than that? But, of course, this is **not** what the Buddha’s teaching on social well-being is about!

## **The 4 biases**

Early Buddhism is about the vision, experience, awakening and path of the Buddha. He arose at a time when Indian society was at its most prosperous, and became the basis for the rise of the Indian empire. In many ways (especially economically and religiously), Indian society then was very similar to our urban society here (take, for example, the city or place where we live, or any urban area in our country), it is crowded with people and activities.

Even though it is easy to get rich today, or to live off others’ wealth (what most religious people do today), there is always this feeling: this is **not satisfying**. When wealth is easily gotten, honestly or religiously, it becomes less than a human pursuit. Whether we know it or not, we lose our humanity. We fall into subhuman states of **greed**, not knowing when to stop enjoying pleasures; states of **ill will**, not liking others being better than what we are; states of **delusion**, seeing life as having things, that they define us; and states of **fear**, a serious lack of true joy, love and self-understanding.

## **Subhumans**

Hence, we are, respectively, truly **pretas** (hungry ghosts), unable to be satisfied with anything; **hell-beings**, full of mental, social and physical violence and hate; **asuras** (fierce demons), deluded by self-aggrandizement, narcissistic, exploiting others; and **animals**, habitually fearful of standing up for what is right or good, existing routinely, domesticated for food, clothing, housing and health).

Occasionally, when we are touched by the Buddha’s teaching in our inner radiance, we suddenly notice our **subhuman** state, and are disgusted with it. The peace, joy and charity we feel is often enough to uplift us from that subhumanity. But we keep falling back into the abyss of subhumanity due to constant contact with other subhumans, especially in the form of religious and authority figures. It takes a long time for us to realize this or to free ourself

from them—this is one occasion when the Dhamma empowers us to be free of such low existence.

## **Our world**

Our “**world**” or social reality is made up of such subhumanity: those of pretas, hell-beings, asuras and animals. We are hardly human yet even though we have the good karmic body of a human. Our **mind** is still subhuman, due to past conditioning. We are exploited by other subhumans who exploit **religion** and other modes of power to influence and domesticate us for their purposes and consumption. This is what the Vinaya-less monastics are doing.

In **the Vīmaṅsaka Sutta** (M 47), the discourse on the investigator (SD 35.6), the Buddha encourages us to be **investigators**, to investigate even the conduct of the Buddha himself, what more of monks and nuns, and those we know and meet. Through constant observation, when we notice they are filled with **lust** or greed, with **hate** or ill will, with **delusion** or cunning, we should not befriend them in any way. This would encourage them in their bad habitual karma and also get us caught in such bad karma, too.

## **Growth: social, individual, spiritual**

We can live wholesome Buddhist **social** lives by relating to one another with charity, love and wisdom, helping one another to grow socially—by keeping the **precepts** properly and avoiding bad monastics. We grow **individually** (individuate) by keeping mindfulness and meditation as best as we can. We grow **spiritually** by constantly reflecting on impermanence, so that we reach the path of awakening in this life itself.

Most of the monastics we meet in town and talk-shows, who live in their own houses, do not keep to the **vinaya**, and live like layman, but are richer than us (yet we donate to them!) and do not pay income tax. They drive around at night in their own cars; even go to casinos, invest money, own property and businesses, here and overseas. The Buddha calls this **wrong livelihood**.

## **Right livelihood**

As lay Buddhists, we should at least live by **right livelihood**, based on the 5 precepts. When we decide to get out of the rat-race and crowded world to live as **renunciants**, then we keep to the **right livelihood** of the noble path, based on the Vinaya, meditation that can bring dhyana (to overcome lust), and wisdom leading to arhathood.

In **the (Aṭṭhaka) Yasa Sutta** (A 8.86), the Buddha declares: “May I never meet with fame, nor fame ever meet with me!” He advises monastics to let go of “that dung of pleasure,” that is, gain, honour and praise! Only monastics who do not meditate or are unable to do so would be attracted to these. (SD 55.13)

## Monastic and laymen

Such monks and nuns are **renunciants** who would rather live with other renunciants in the **forest** or forest dwellings. The Buddha praises monastics who live in this way—as recorded in **the (Chakka) Nāgita Sutta** (A 6.42), SD 55.12b. Such monastics are a great blessing to us when they come to us for alms (they never accept money or unallowable offerings like Rolex watches and cars). There are laymen licitors (*kappiya*) who keep the finances of such retreat centres and drive vehicles for these monastics when needed.

Such an environment is ideal for both monastic and lay practitioners to keep the precepts, meditate and study the Dhamma-Vinaya. They also conduct retreats that we can attend, and they occasionally are invited to give Dhamma talks and conduct retreats for us. All this is done with the sterling spiritual quality like that of the Buddha's time. Such is the wholesome alternative spiritual life that the Buddha provides us—we can live as pleasure-indulging (*kāma, bhogī*) lay practitioners, keeping to the 5 precepts, or as pleasure-renouncing monastics keeping to the Vinaya. Neither should be confused for the other.

R686 Revisoning Buddhism 275

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

Copyright by Piya Tan ©2020