

Kierkegaard for Buddhism

From the crowd

[Previously published as fb200107 piya]

If we are ants in a huge army of ants, we only do what ants do. Even when an ant is alone, it is always in some sense connected with the ant army, the ant crowd. Ants are never alone; they live and move as a crowd.

Unlike ants, we begin to be human when we start feeling the aloneness of being. Yet, it is not a Cartesian notion that “I” exist because I think. Sadly, most of us actually understand that it is the “I” that thinks.

“We” think, in the sense of recognizing that there are others. When I write I often use “WE” because I feel the beautiful aloneness; for, I know I am not lonely, that my existence does not depend on the crowd. Indeed, with the crowd, I exist not: I am but an ant.

A crowd

Notice how religion is always, ultimately, a **crowd**; Buddhism is a crowd: members, Temples, sects, statistics. The crowd always loses its way: it tramples all underfoot, creating its own path to suffering and disaster.

The truth never comes to a crowd; the truth never comes to everyone all at the same time. The truth only comes to an individual, one individual at a time, as does love. The Buddha has never said: Love the crowd, or join the crowd. He reaches out to the crowd, he sends the arhats into the crowd to draw out persons, to make individuals of us.

Kierkegaard

Søren Kierkegaard was a philosopher and theologian of Denmark, where Lutheran Christianity was the state religion. Kierkegaard is well known for his portrayal of man alone against the crowd, against the Church, against organized religion.

In this regard, Kierkegaard might well be describing the historical Buddha. He is always alone even before the crowd: religion, society, race, the world, all of which he has renounced. The great saints who understand the Buddha Dhamma, too, arise alone before the Buddha.

Arhat

To be an **arhat** is to liberatingly see the truth of reality for oneself. It is not the truth in itself that is liberating; for, then, one need not see at all. It is the **seeing** that frees us from being an ant in the crowd of the world, of religion, of race, of Buddhism.

For Kierkegaard, man is essentially an individual, not a member of a species or race; and ethical and religious truth is known through individual existence and decision: decision or attention through subjectivity, not objectivity.

Subjective man

In Buddhist language, it is not the sensate (what our senses experience of the world) that frees us; sense-objects imprison us as ants to the crowd of senses. When we see for ourself that all this is **mind-made**, subjective, that we are no more ants, that we are man.

Only as man can we walk the path of awakening. How else can awakening make sense if “we” do not awaken. The crowd never awakens. It merely moves on and on endlessly, like Sisyphus, proudly driven by a sense of achievement, by an uncontrollable urge to achieve.

Not a Buddhist

I have never said: I am the true Buddhist, that others are not Buddhists. On the contrary, as I understand Buddha Dhamma, the more I realize I am **not** a Buddhist, not a statistic, an ant in the crowd that is Buddhism.

All I can say is that, in my imperfection as a Buddhist, I can know what Buddhism is or is not. Since I am not a Buddhist, how can I say who is or is not a Buddhist? Hence, it is **not** what I know but what I **do** with this knowing that defines me.

The more I know Buddhism, I notice over the years, the more I reject that knowing. Only in renouncing this knowing, do we realize it is really ignorance. For, what we now know only shows what we knew to be but a step to what I now know. In this sense, I am no more A Buddhist; to that extent, I **am** Buddhist.

Renunciation

It is true that Buddha Dhamma requires us—as Buddhist (not A Buddhist)—to give up, to renounce, all things. Knowledge is just that: it gives itself up. Ignorance clings to itself. Yes, we speak in metaphors, in parables. That is how we free ourself from language so that we become, we are, what language can only speak of.

There is nothing new about metaphorical words: they give meaningful sounds to what is as old as time itself. Just as the spirit of truth is invisible, so also is its language a secret. A child or a simple-minded person may use words but they always refer to things or feelings. These are all sensate (sense-based) things.

Metaphors

Metaphors free words from their senses, helping us see directly into true reality. It gives us **purpose** in life. All that we can know, all there is to know of this world, is that **everything** (including every thing) changes.

Since everything changes, there is really nothing for us to hold on to with which to compare ourselves. For, all that we can compare are sense-experiences that are mind-made. We have created that world. We have made playthings of our senses instead of seeing through them as windows of passing knowledge.

Being

The Buddha teaches us to simply see what **is**, know our **being**. Most of us, like children and ants, seem contented with knowing that “things” exist. We are stuck with this kind of knowing. We collect things like ants do, and move as a crowd like ants do.

Those of us who look a little deeper, see our **being** as a person or consciousness. We then momentarily stop being ants since we begin to see our separate existences, our being. This is the knowledge with which we grow into a human child, loved by parents and persons; that allows us to fall in love with another.

Individual

Even at this level, if we see others merely as persons, we only see them as being lovable or unlovable, desirable or undesirable. We merely react to them, a conditioned response, propelled by the past. Only when we understand that to love is to **learn**, that we grow beyond being merely a person: we become an **individual**, even a true individual, like the Buddha and the arhats.

Now we have a 3rd sense of being, one that only the true individual can know in the sense that he **is** that being. There is no more crowd, no more self and other. Metaphorically, we can only say: they **is**, we **is** (it is beyond grammar). This is nirvana.

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

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