

The faith that truly frees

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6:*

Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c (forthcoming).

5.4.6 The faith that truly frees

5.4.6.1 Buddhism, like the major world religions, started off nobly, as a quest for human dignity and freedom. Over time, after the Buddha's death, especially when the religion spread beyond India, the true renunciants are still found in the forest solitude, few and far between. In the urban areas or crowded communities, it began to be adapted and revised by local theologians, ideologists and zealots for their own narrow, often narcissistic enterprises. The virtuosi who claimed to have mastered the teachings brahminized themselves as an elitist class to be supported, often feared, by their followers.

In Buddhism, the later clerics and preachers revised, re-brahminized the early teachings to resurrect the soul-view, transfer merit like commodity for the dead who are stuck in some Hades (instead of being reborn according to karma), and the clerics becoming priests to be served and funded, even feared, as a higher class simply on account of status. Understandably, we see today, Buddhism everywhere becoming a hotbed for lust, hatred, injustice, racism and other delusive situations.

In almost every Buddhist society, or where Buddhism has any influence, we are likely to see **2 social classes**. The first is that of those who chicken-scratch daily for their living—the hoi polloi—who are supposed to feed, fund and fear the upper classes defined by status, wealth, power and religiosity. We are the ants, legion; we are the grasshoppers, fed by legion. It's almost always sunny here; it never snows; so we tell a different tale [5.4.5.1].

The ants die in droves smothered by earth, drowned by water, burnt by fire, blown off by the wind; but we are legion. We labour daily; we labour forth workers. We serve the grasshoppers who fiddle, sing, dance, play—and reproduce their kind: that's our life, too; we know no other. This is how we live until our time is up. Then there are other ants, other grasshoppers, without end: ants and grasshoppers are we forever, it seems.

Amongst us there are those who realize we don't have to be ants and grasshoppers. We can evolve and transform ourselves into humans, to think, to feel, to speak, to write, to learn about this path of freedom, and move on it. We are able to hear, we must be willing to listen. Failing to hear and listen, we live the cycles of ants and grasshoppers. When we closely hear and listen, we grow as individuals, as a society and lead others, other societies. We are able to live in a better world and enjoy greater freedom because of such fables, and more so because of great ideas of great thinkers.

5.4.6.2 Many great thinkers have arisen in history with great ideas for our progress, freedom and peace. We are able to live today writing and reading this mainly because their ideas have been heeded and lived. English-born US Founding Father, political activist, philosopher, political theorist, and revolutionary **Thomas Paine** (1737-1809), in his classic work, *The Age of Reason* (1794, 1795, 1807), writes this in Part 1, chapter 1 (The author's profession of faith):

All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man, that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.

It is impossible to calculate the moral mischief, if I may so express it, that mental lying has produced in society. When a man has so far corrupted and prostituted the chastity of his mind, as to subscribe his professional belief to things he does not believe, he has prepared himself for the commission of every other crime. He takes up the trade of a priest for the sake of gain, and in order to qualify himself for that trade, he begins with a perjury. Can we conceive anything more destructive to morality than this?

(Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, 1794)¹

What does Paine mean when he writes: “Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in *professing to believe what he does not believe*”? A simple interpretation of Paine’s saying is that it is self-contradictory when we *know* that many, if not most, of religious teachings are false, cannot be empirically proven, and which are clearly often violently divisive—such as belief in an unseen being that preachers claim created us and this universe, and so on—and yet we claim to *believe* in them! When we allow ourselves to believe in this manner, we are likely to be capable of committing atrocious acts against others and insidious acts to ourselves in the name of religion.

Paine is unpopular in the US because of the uncomfortable truths he speaks regarding religion in general, and of Christianity, in particular, despite the acclaim for his ingenuity in writing, poetry, science, and engineering. Many of Paine’s contemporaries ridiculed him for his criticisms, and only a handful of people attended his funeral following his death in 1809. Even today the US school systems are loath to promote the works of Thomas Paine because of his negative views on organized religion. Paine’s **deism**—the belief in God, but the eschewing of organized religion—is often erroneously confused with atheism. Yet, without Paine’s pen, Washington’s sword would not have been so mighty.²

Oddly, many people seemed defiantly moved by the grandiose narcissistic ideas, lies and antics of Donald Trump [2.6.1.3]. One likely explanation is probably that Trump is perceived as being very rich, and as a brash speaker who voices the frustrations and views of his followers. Trump’s **grandiose narcissism** seems to work very well with the vulnerable narcissism of his zealous audience. Trump is thus a clear symptom of a very sick social trend in the US. The legal system may bring him to justice, but only a wholesomely human-centred educational and socioeconomic system will prevent the 2nd comings of another Trump and his legion of like-minded followers.

¹ Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Feedbooks [[Download](#)].

² H G Unger, *Thomas Paine and the Clarion Call for American Independence*, NY: Da Capo Press, 2019. [[National Archives News](#)]

5.4.6.3 Although the class dichotomy of **the ants and the grasshopper** seems to reflect the social situation in Buddhist communities and countries, it is a simplistic one—a fatal error in the socialist ideas of **Karl Marx** (1818-1883) who saw this as a fatalism of history. It is, at best, merely a *symptom* of a problem, not the real problem. We may start our critical analysis for a better Buddhist society here, but we must look at the situation in a broader perspective.

Marx has shown how religion is a tool of oppression that masks exploitation and creates “false consciousness.”³ However, Marx’s ideas not only failed to replace religion, but wherever it is implemented on a large-scale, it led to *unfreedom, inhumanity and economic oppression*. Modern-day Marxists blame *human failure* for them. According to them, true Marxism has yet to be implemented, as past followers have clearly corrupted the doctrine by adopting quasi-capitalist policies.

We could well say that Buddhism began as a money-free socialist system but has today become an ideal example of capitalist wealth management. We might as well imagine, too, that “true Buddhism” has not yet arrived, and is diluted by human weakness. But then this may mean we have abandoned the Buddha of our time and look in at the future Buddha. It’s like abandoning our biological and anticipating a new father: one wonders if this means anything at all!

Notwithstanding the various interesting points of discussion about Marxism, and the intersections between Buddhism and Marxism,⁴ we need to keep to the theme of this SD volume: a psychopathology of mindfulness. We will limit ourselves to where Marxism has failed to rebut, much less replace religion, especially in the light of the positive functions of religion such as psychological adjustment to difficulties and misfortune.

Marxism sees the material world as open to illimitable productive transformations through human labour. Science will progressively enable men to control all natural forces and to shape their environment to their own ends: the responsibility lies with mankind. In the meantime, disasters can only be accepted. Buddhism, on the other hand, claims to regulate those natural forces under demonic influence through the cosmic dimension of Dhamma, a claim which Marxism may ridicule, but which it cannot match.

(Martin Stuart-Fox, “Marxism and Theravada Buddhism,” *Pacific Affairs* 56,3 1983:442)

³ “False consciousness” is used primarily by Marxists to convey the idea that ideology embodies a systematically distorted view of the world. It presupposes a distinction between the appearance of things and their underlying reality, and characterizes thought which takes appearances at face value and constructs specious theories on this basis. (ed D Miller et al, *The Blackwell Ency of Political Thought*, 1987, 2000).

⁴ See eg M **Stuart-Fox**, “Marxism and Theravada Buddhism: The legitimation of political authority in Laos,” *Pacific Affairs* 56,3 autumn 1983:428-454. **Xue Yu**, “Buddhist efforts for the reconciliation of Buddhism and Marxism in the early years of the People’s Republic of China,” in (edd) Kiely & Jessup, *Recovering Buddhism in Modern China*, NY: Columbia Univ Press, 2016:177-215 (ch 5). K J **Struhl**, “Buddhism and Marxism: points of intersection,” *International Communication in Chinese Culture* 4,1 2017:103-116. G **Priest**, “Marxism and Buddhism: Not such strange bedfellows,” *J of the American Philosophical Assoc*, 2018:2-13.

We see today the mind sciences working with Buddhism for a better understanding of how the mind works and how we can work the mind for a better self and world. This marriage of ancient wisdom and modern science is being feted by all the modern world and almost every self-preserving religion is incorporating meditation in its name. When religions meditate they do not wage war: this is a significantly great contribution to world peace.

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

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