

## The religious and mental health

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6:*

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

### 5.2.6 The religious and mental health

**5.2.6.1** A wholesome community cannot be taken for granted; it is the mutual and extended labour of generations of Dharma-hearted individuals going back to the Buddha himself. For every joyful and wise Buddhist there are many more of those who are unwise and unhappy. Hence, it behoves us out of compassion not to rest on our laurels in the cool shade of the Bodhi tree while they suffer in the fire and ice of samsara.

Before we are able to inspire them to change for the better, we need to know how, and possibly *why*, they are suffering. This is no easy task, but like all difficult tasks, we must start by wishing them well and happy. Then we investigate to the best of our ability their situation.

**5.2.6.2** Unlike just a generation ago (even up to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century), when it was difficult to get helpful teaching on early Buddhism, we are today spoilt for choice with a number of annotated translations and modern commentaries in the commercial market. On top of that, we have a rich and free flowing flood of information and misinformation on the Internet, and even those who loudly claim they have attained streamwinning, once-returning, non-returning and even arhathood [6].

Most Buddhist teachings have a good, even remarkable, impact on people, but as Buddhism become more globalized and grows big along entrepreneurial lines, we get more monks and nuns losing touch with the spirit of renunciation, becoming wealthy and class-conscious, so that Buddhism becomes very much like the Catholic religion in the Middle Ages, propping up respectable nobles and elitist clergy. In short, we see Buddhism systematically and severely secularized. The Buddhist followers are, as a rule none the wiser about what really is going on; after all, they are *followers*.

**5.2.6.3** In our times (the 21<sup>st</sup> century), Buddhism is often a powerful means for the desperate and cunning to attract tax-free wealth and a comfortable retirement plan. Buddhist writings on almost any popular subject, and translations of Buddhist texts are profitably marketed and sold in every large bookshop and online. One does not even need to be Buddhist to work and live off this Buddhist bonanza: the magic mantra for the **golden touch** is the word and title “Buddhist.”

Like Midas’ golden touch,<sup>1</sup> whatever the Buddhist entrepreneur touches today tends to become “gold,” hard and cold wealth. The Buddhist teachings are seen as objects to be acquired, mastered, making one a master of teachings fixed and canonized by oneself. This is Dharma that is very private limited for attracting wealth. Even “renunciation” is seen as a form of retirement plan. Monastic robes now have pockets for wallets and bank-cards.

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<sup>1</sup> The most famous person bearing the name **King Midas** is remembered in Greek mythology for his ability to turn everything he touched into gold (called *chrysopoeia* in alchemy). This came to be called the *golden touch*, or the *Midas touch*. This myth might be linked to legends told about one Midas and his father Gordias, credited with founding the Phrygian capital city Gordium and tying the Gordian Knot, indicating that they were believed to have lived some time in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, well before the Trojan War. However, Homer does not mention Midas or Gordias, while instead mentioning two other Phrygian kings, Mygdon and Otreus.

At the root of the problem is the fact that such “renunciants” are overtly or covertly breaking the Vinaya rules they have vowed to keep. On the broader reality, the spiritual or Buddhist life of these actors have been replaced by commodified relations. These modern clerics see themselves as independent elites at the disposal of society’s upper classes. The lower-class Buddhists relate—or are allowed to relate—to these modern clerics only on ritual occasions that have to be paid for in some form than making mere donations of almsfood or monastic robes.

**5.2.6.4** While it is true that times have changed, it is unhelpful to view that the 3 jewels—the Buddha, the teaching and the spiritual community—must change with the times. The Buddha himself has warned about what should never be changed and what can or should be reinterpreted. **The Neyy’attha Nī’t’attha Sutta** (A 2.3.5+6) records the Buddha as reminding us to correctly read the sutta text. We should note whether it is presented in an implicit manner, that is, whose sense should be “drawn out” (*neyy’attha*), such as stories and metaphors; or it is presented in an explicit manner, that is, whose sense “has been drawn out” (*nī’t’attha*), in terms of ultimate reality, such as the 3 characteristics, the 4 truths or the 5 aggregates.<sup>2</sup>

A very significant implication of this teachings is that early Buddhism is defined as our seeing true reality—seeing it, accepting it, transforming oneself as a result. Beyond that, how we present ideas about true reality is like using our finger to point out the moon, or pointing to the moon on the surface of some still water. In an important sense, we can only use language to say *this* is it (explicitly) or *that* is it (implicitly).

Then again, we may misconstrue it—not knowing the difference between this and that—we proclaim, “*That’s* it!” or worse, “*I* am it!” Then we draw attention away from true reality to our own self: “*I* am *the* It!”: this is the closest I can put into words to show how ridiculous or absurd it sounds. Not only do we not understand true reality, we have divorced ourselves very far from it.

Instead of disarming ourselves of the self, we have tried to arm ourselves with delusion. We have put our self in the place of true reality; but true reality is beyond selfless: it is **nonself**. To say “selfless” means there is a “self” that we have given up: perhaps this is a *view* of the self. But nonself means that it has nothing to do with any self since there is no such thing. Our problem is not that there is a self or soul, but that we are often fixated with **the self-view**, the notion that there is one.

The subtlest and most deleterious effect of self-view is seen in extreme forms of **narcissism**, a preoccupation with one’s self to the extent of ignoring others. The main disadvantage of such a fixation is that it is the diametrical opposite of any understanding of the extended mind, that is the basis for personal growth (individuation) and social evolution [3.1.1.1]. This is what we will turn to now.

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

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<sup>2</sup> On the 2 truths in early Buddhism, see SD 1e (10), esp (10.4).