

How the Bible made me a better Buddhist

by Piya Tan

As Singapore becomes more English-speaking and global (TMC has many overseas students), we also see a growing presence of Christianity and religious mobility (see Straits Times, Saturday, 9 August 2008), we (as Buddhists) must come to terms with such a challenge.

My religious life began with the Bible: I loved reading, and my brother was an elder in his own church. That was in the early 1960s. I even have a certificate from an Australian Bible school for successfully completing a study of the four Gospels and a few books of the Old Testament.

Two things I learned from my Bible studies: they (many different Bibles) often use beautiful English and they write with such conviction. You will see how I try to write in beautiful English and with conviction in what I believe today.

One thing troubled me though. Near the end of my course, I asked my tutor how I should treat my non-Christian friends: a saintly Hindu octogenarian, a Bahai classmate, Muslim friends, and many Chinese friends of various religions. In one short paragraph, he said that they worshipped Satan, and that I best avoided them!

I was shocked, to say the least! He had not even met any of my friends. Moreover, I have not come across anywhere in the Bible where it says you should hate your friends.

I can say that I have at least one good Christian friend, that is, my brother. He respected my religion and loved me even when I was a monk. Once he quoted the Bible to me, "Let not a brother be a stumbling block to another brother."

Another helpful piece of advice he gave me was to work for what I really believed in. He told me to set up a kind of trust or even a small company, if I wanted to avoid human weaknesses, such as quarrels and lack of commitment. This is one of the ideas that inspired the Minding Centre.

If more Buddhists were like him, we would be more successful in working for Buddhism.

When I was a monk, my eldest nephew once visited me on a Sunday. Then the puja bell rang. I told him that I have to go for puja, and suggested that he went for his prayers in the church next door. He replied that he could not do that! "Why," I asked.

He said, "They are of a different confession." My sad reply: "Now you know why I am not a Christian: if I joined any *one* church, I will have to denounce over 6000 *other* churches!" I can have more friends without being a Christian.

Please don't get me wrong: Christianity, like Buddhism and the other world religions, have great teachings. But people are messing all of them up. I loved studying religion, living ones, dead ones, new ones. But only Buddhism encourages me to think for myself and that the answer lies within me.

A saying from Amos still inspires me: “Walk humbly with your God.” As a young monk, I put in every effort to study all the Buddhist religions: Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana, Zen, Nichiren, Western Buddhism, etc. After some 20 years, I still find that the Buddha’s Buddhism is still the best. Still I have a lot to learn from other religions, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

In a famous beautiful verse from the first Corinthians, Paul writes, “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could move mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” Then I discovered that the Buddha too (2 millennia before) speaks in a similar tone. But how do I learn to love and show it? I only really learned this when I became a monk and learned lovingkindness meditation, and I discovered a greater love than even charity.

For, to give with love and wisdom is the best giving. To *love* is to give a hand to someone when he needs it; to give *wisdom* is to teach him how to help himself and give a hand to others, too.

A couple of Bible verses puzzle me, though. One is where John the apostle says, “No greater love has a man than this, that he lays down his life for another.” I discovered later that the Buddha had said the very same thing 2600 years ago (see Sigalovada Sutta). Then I thought, if the Buddha had died for us, the world today would have had no way out of suffering! Thank you, *Buddha*, for living for us. Buddhaghosa, too, said in his Visuddhimagga that it is better not to die, but to live for those you love!

Both Matthew and Luke said something like “Do not resist evil. If someone smites you on one cheek, give him the other. If someone takes your cloak, let him take your shirt, too.” The Samyutta tells an interesting story about how the Buddha did something just like that (S 10.12)! There is also a Chan story where a poor monk sheltered a thief who then stole his bowl. But, he got up and ran after the thief: “Here, take my robe, too!”

Often in a bus or train or in public, I meet an evangelist who slaps me on my left cheek, and I used to give him my right, too. But it got worse, he kept on slapping me. Finally, I told them in a bus on Bukit Timah Road: “Please stop slapping me on my cheeks. You don’t know anything about cheek-slapping. Please find out more about it from the Bible.”

It’s not that I love the Bible less, but I love the Buddha more. If you are a true believer of your religion, and you find people do not really practise what they preach, you will surely find solace in the Buddha. For, he tells you that *you are not alone*.

All by himself the Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree
All the five monks left him, but he struggled on
His greatest moment came when he was all alone
The wisest being of all arose in that stillness.

Share with me this great reflection:

“When I face my life’s great struggles, I may be all alone,
But so did the Buddha in his greatest moment.”

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