

Why Buddhism is boring (for some)

by Piya Tan

We are basically controlled by unconscious or latent tendencies of liking and disliking: we are victims of the push and pull effect. Things we have experienced as “pleasant” when we were young tend to register a “pull” effect when we perceive a similar experience. What we remember as “unpleasant” in the past is likely to be projected onto a similar experience. All this is done in an autopiloted manner. In meditation lingo, this is called “the mental hindrance of sensual desire.”

The mental hindrance of sensual desire unconsciously makes us “measure” others. You will notice that within moments of meeting someone, we already have a notion whether “I am better than...,” or “I am inferior to...” (“He is better than me...”), or “I am as good as (this person).” If we allow ourselves to be goaded on by this primal instinct, we are likely to fall under the weight of our own conceit (that is what is called in Buddhism). Just as we are averse to others judging us, it works the same the other way around.

The skill to cultivate here is to meet people as if we are meeting them the first time, especially people we think we know well (including family).

Sensual desire also reflects a deep lack or need of some desirable quality. We often project this need onto some favourable or iconic figure, usually someone we perceive as successful, powerful or famous. This is “charisma,” that is, the projection of what we see as desirable qualities onto others.

There is a whole discourse, the Adhipateyya Sutta (A 3.40) where the Buddha advises us against simply following other by charisma. For, this is usually a false projection, when we should be cultivating the positive qualities within ourselves. In the Vimamsaka Sutta (M 47), the Buddha advises his followers to even carefully examine if he (the Buddha himself) had traits of greed, hate or delusion.

Conversely, the Buddha is implying that we should examine if we ourselves have at least toned down or healthily suppressed (as against “repressed”) our own greed, hate and delusion, and also our fear, pride and conceit. Liberating wisdom begins with self-knowing.

When I was a monk, one of my “vocational hazards” was meeting very conceited people. Once I met young man who came up to me and asked if I was “awakened.” Obviously, this youth was new to Buddhism! “Why do you ask?” I replied. “Oh,” he said, “only if you are awakened you can be my teacher.” “Oh”, I replied, “what makes you think I want you as my student in the first place.” It was a sort of wake-up call for him, you might say.

So Buddhism is boring for some of us because we have already decided what awakening is, or we think we already know what the Dharma is. And what we want is to have others present the Dharma just the way we like it. Our learning has stopped; we only want to be entertained.

The solution to this sad self-limiting rut is not a difficult one. Simply ask ourselves, “WHY do I find this teaching (note this “process,” not “person”) boring?” Do not attempt to answer it intellectually: let your heart speak for itself. When the answer finally comes, you will surprise yourself to know that you have such great potential to see the Dharma in a most interesting way.

I have always found Buddhism interesting, even when spoken by the most boring person. The most important thing is that I make sure I do not bore myself. The Dharma and Suttas make sure of that!

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