

MEME (that's Me and Me always!) by Piya Tan

Scientists, like Richard Dawkins, have noticed that the way that ideas and constructs spread amongst individuals and groups follow the laws of selective adaptation that govern the evolution of species. Just as genes transmit biological and other characteristics of a species, a MEME transfers ideas by replicating itself.

An idea, for example, is widely propagated, not because it is good, but simply because it is a successful reproducer. A very good example is that of an evangelical religion that discourages critical thinking and encourages aggressive proselytization: it is a virulent MEMEPLEX (a complex of memes), in that it encourages *self-replication*. In short, memes function to make exact copies of themselves.

Of all the memes, *religious memes*—indeed, *religion* itself, as a memeplex—is the most selfish of all. Religion often not only wants to replicate itself, but at the same time, often hopes to destroy any and all rivals. In this sense, religion—especially those that are intolerant of others—is the most narcissistic of belief systems, since it only wants to draw others' attention to itself, and to deny others, or at best to rationalize other systems on its own terms. In this sense, such a religion is a form of *profound psychological denial*.¹

Since *denial* is an unconscious defence mechanism, we must make every effort to understand religion as such, so that we do not fall into the rut of a very private and limited reality. We need to humbly accept *religious denial* as a personal problem, as a human problem, one that can easily infect others, and in a very widely destructive manner, as religious history has repeatedly shown.²

We often construct our God, Gods, and gods, and our demons in our image. We also construct our own Buddha, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and deities according to our needs. In a sense, we must not deny our own demons, nor do we need to live with them for eternity. When we think that our Gods and Buddhas have failed to give us what we want, we helplessly seek solutions outside of ourselves, falling under power of our senses—this is the nature of lust, of SENSE-DESIRE. It is a refusal or failure to see within ourselves (and similarly in others) the potential for good and liberation.

To deny others spiritually—such as regarding them as “sinners,” or as caste members, or as outside the tribe—is the greatest violence we can incur upon them. We have laid the basis for justified and continued ILL-WILL towards them, and hence, it is right, even holy, to destroy these “others”! For this reason, Buddhists train themselves to learn to *unconditionally* accept others, especially those who are in some way different.

Once we relegate all our spiritual potential to the idea of a single supreme power that is outside of us—once we build the Temple of God externally, as it were—we will fall into the MENTAL SLOTH AND TORPOR of not working out our own salvation, but expecting an external force to do this for us. This is as if we are sick, but expecting others to find us and give us the medicine without our ever seeking it ourselves and taking it ourselves. When we disempower ourselves, we stop thinking; we close the door to wisdom; we are blind to self-

¹ See **How Buddhism Became Chinese** = SD 40b.3 (3.1); also **Gadrabha S** (A 3.81) = SD 24.10b Intro (2.4.2).

² See eg **Me: The nature of conceit** = SD 19.2a (3.2).

liberation. We feel ever and deeply tired, always in need of God's succour. We have fallen into a profound state of *emotional dependence*. Hence, it is said: God helps those who help themselves; or, put in a non-mythical way: *you can help yourself only if you really try*.

On the other hand, if we take this self-denial very seriously, and in a systematic way (such as in a polemical denial of others), we will always be in the grip of RESTLESSNESS AND REMORSE. We feel as if our "souls" are restless until we have served our God, our master, or our religion, often by denying or destroying unbelievers. When we *think* we have failed, or have disobeyed a commandment, we *feel* a terrible guilt, a total lack of self-worth. We have simply lost touch with our potential to rise from our self-constructed subhuman states.

The most harmful of the mental hindrances to opening our minds to spiritual liberation is that of DOUBT, that is, the inability to look within and see the self-constructed virtual phantoms of lust, ill will, lack, and guilt. What is construed as *faith* is often simply a deep commitment to denying that these phantoms exist. *True spiritual faith* arises when we see through all these self-constructions and memes we have been infected with.

There will come a time in our long cosmic history when we would understand *the true nature of religion*, just as our ancestors have emerged from the superstition that earth, water, fire and wind were gods or demons. Two and a half millennia ago, the Buddha gave us that liberating knowledge, but we are rapidly forgetting it. We have watered it down, severely adulterated, modernized and commodified it into local cults, privatised systems, and monetary missions, so that we are losing our best tool for spiritual liberation. Yet, if we look deeply enough, underneath and beyond all the sectarian divides, pious concoctions, and religious materialism, we might just catch a liberating glimpse of true reality.

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[This is an excerpt from Piya Tan's essay on "Memes: The idea of samsaric genes." See SD 26.3 see: <http://pali.house.googlepages.com/26.3Memespiya.pdf>]