

## Talking Bad About Buddhism

by Piya Tan

There are a number of books written by non-Buddhists attacking Buddhism. Decades back, the mud-slingers, mostly evangelists in a British colonial era, were poorly informed about Buddhism. Ironically, their books had just the opposite effect: westerners who were unfamiliar with Buddhism became interested in it! In fact, one of the roots of the statistical Buddhist growth we see today began humbly in this way.

Nowadays the mud-slingers have upgraded themselves: their mud is thicker and their slings more sophisticated. Some of them even take the trouble to befriend Buddhists, even feigning interest, to get inside information. Some of these mud-slings are very well researched, and can be helpful even for the Buddhist work. For example, there is a book on different Buddhist tribes that have not been “evangelized.” Such a book would be useful to the growing number of Buddhist groups doing field work to help poor and disaster-struck Buddhist communities.

Most of the other books that attack Buddhism list such things as: many monasteries do not really know or teach authentic Buddhism; many temples centre around fund-raising and will twist Buddhism in any way to attract funds; monastics are simply having a good time at the expense of the lay Buddhists; many Buddhists are superstitious; and so on. Surprisingly, these are the very same weaknesses that concerned Buddhists are trying to highlight so that we can correct them. It is almost like these mud-slingers are doing all the leg-work for us!

Now the question arises why would these mud-slingers sacrifice their precious time to write something “bad” about Buddhism? Firstly, they feel uneasily suspect that the Buddha has taught some profound and powerful truth. Secondly, I think they feel a real sense of threat, that Buddhism is growing too fast. Thirdly, they obviously lack faith in their own religion to think that their religion can grow by their talking bad about other religions!

But there is something more sinister here about why some evangelists try to blatantly attack other religions without thinking of its consequences. The reason clearly has to do with their idea of an all-powerful creator-god who rewards them with blessings and salvation simply out of divine grace through their faith.

Let me use a simple simile. The almighty creator-god idea is like a powerful witch-doctor, whom the whole village (or jungle, if you like) hold in fear, and resort to him in times of need and danger. Whoever comes to the witch-doctor for help, no matter how bad his or her case may be, it depends on his mood. He may or may not help you.

But if you praise him hard enough, or better, talk bad about the modern doctor in the next village (or town, if you like), then he is more likely to help you. Of course, no one dares to question whether the witch-doctor’s medicine works or not. If it works, it show that you have great faith in the witch-doctor; if not, you better not mention it, because it shows you lack faith! This double bind is often effectively used in cults.

The good doctor in the town nearby is always accessible, and patients need only wait their turn. Or, in the case of an emergency, the doctor would go all the way out to treat this patient immediately. In fact, this good doctor is so compassionate that he makes great effort to teach people proper hygiene (called “moral virtue”) so that the body is healthy, and how to be happy (called “meditation”) so that the mind is healthy.

This way, we need not depend on him every time we fall sick. We are taught first aid (called “lovingkindness”) and how to properly take our medicine (called “Dharma”). Sometimes, we do not see the good doctor around, but we are not worried because we know he is elsewhere teaching others how to help themselves.

The most wonderful thing about the good doctor’s method is that he takes pains to transfer his wisdom and compassion to us, so that in time, we too can become good doctors if we choose to. If not, at least we know how to stay healthy and happy without the need of a crafty and temperamental witch-doctor. Furthermore, if we do not want to be good doctors ourselves, we can always work as kind nurses whenever others need help. And we don’t even have to mention the good doctor’s name; for, we all know who he really is.

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