

We Must Figure Things Out For Ourselves

By Brett Hansen

I became interested in Buddhism because I admired the calmness of my high school math teacher and decided it was something I wanted to attain for myself. I was very self-analytical, lacking in self-confidence, yet I knew I was not far from peace and happiness, since everything was going right on the outside.

I became aware of Evangelical Christianity in College, but its absolutisms of heaven and hell did not match my experiences. How could God make a person and love him and then banish him to eternal hell for wrongdoing? The rules of being “saved” also seem problematic—especially as they apply to people born before Christ or not exposed to His teaching. The teachings of the Buddha, as I understand them, seem like reasonable, verifiable explanations for phenomena without requiring “faith” in an explanation developed to support concepts with a shaky foundation or some individual’s personal agenda.

Sometimes I wish I had never run into Buddhism because it can be hard work. I wake up early to meditate before getting ready for the day. One must always be mindful. I am different from most people because I don’t eat meat. Hardly anyone I know is Buddhist. The way some people practice religion seems like it can be so easy: go to a local church. Let somebody else do the thinking for you. Ask for forgiveness at the end of the day. Of course the benefit realized is based on the effort invested; I am grateful for all I have learned.

Please do not misunderstand—I am not anti-Christian or even against established religion. I think that the core teachings of all major religions are not that far apart. It just seems that people of any faith should give careful consideration to the essence of the teachings they follow. It can be argued that the main objective of all faiths is to provide instructions on how to be good (and avoid being evil). The main job in following a faith is to *apply* the teaching in everyday life.

To me, following a religious practice is about becoming a better person. The biggest mistakes are made when a person believes he knows what others should do to be more like (insert name of deity here) and insists on “his way or the highway.” I think the world would be much better served if individuals concentrated on applying their religious teachings to their personal actions, thoughts and behavior instead of trying to police those that are different. It shows a lot of insecurity when the focus is spent being angry at those who go about that same ultimate objective by a different means.

I teach computer programs for telephone systems to people in the telecommunications industry. I recall learning to teach a new computer program and running to an experienced colleague with questions about system details when asked an in-depth question in class. She would say, “Let’s test that and see.” We would reconstruct the specifics and determine the answer. I learned how to find the answers myself.

When I first started teaching, I would marvel at how I would explain a concept and then have it repeated later to me as if no one had said it before. I wanted to shout, “That is what I just said!” Now I recognize that his restatement of the point is the student verifying what he was beginning to understand. It is the process of learning and it doesn’t matter if the student recognizes the original source. What is important is that *he* must eventually become the source.

It seems that many times when a person asks a monk for advice on a personal problem, the answer is “just sit with it.” This answer is frustrating when the person is in pain and wants a solution NOW! It is equally painful for the monk offering the advice, because he usually knows the specific solution to the problem. However, the answer must be discovered—it cannot be

taught or explained. Only through personal experience is the answer realized or the lesson learned. Giving advice is easy, especially when the attachments of the recipient are not shared by the person giving the advice. Receiving advice is easy, but only when the recipient is ready to apply it.

My wife recently stopped smoking after experiencing shortness of breath that drove her to spend eight days in the hospital. I have been corresponding with Reverend Phoebe regarding these events and she suggested that I write something of my experiences for the newsletter. This is what came out. At first I thought these observations had no connection to stressful days we recently endured. As I reviewed what I wrote, it became clear that I have always realized I could not stop my wife from smoking. I guess I needed to remind myself that there was no way to prevent what happened because she had to reach the conclusion through her own experience.
