

THAT FOURTH THOUGHT

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I first really got into Buddhism when I understood that it was not another religion like the bad-dream-like religion I was raised in. In fact Buddhism is not a religion at all, but rather just a method through which to become more aware.

It took a little bit longer for me to understand that Buddhism was not atheistic as many claimed, but rather it is “non-theistic” as in: there is no one up there separate from us pulling the strings. Instead, whatever intelligence there is in the universe (“up there”), we are an integral part of as well. There is no absolute separation, like a class or caste between the historical Buddha and me, only a continuum of awareness at which I am, sorry to say, on a lower rung.

In the Catholicism I was raised in, or so I was told (and even by the Jesuits), there is an absolute difference between God and man, and even an absolute difference between Jesus and myself. No continuum. This I could not accept. I was sure that the very best of me at least was like the very worst of Jesus, and so on. However, I was clearly told “No!” and I asked again and again.

Anyway, Buddhism really clicked in for me when I first came across what are called the “Four Thoughts,” more officially called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” and most commonly just called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.” These are the thoughts that turn the mind away from our busy day-to-day distractions.

Here I only want to discuss that fourth thought, but for those of you who have not encountered them, the four thoughts are:

- (1) Our human life is precious. We should not waste it, but we (our life) should be used for some good purpose.
- (2) Impermanence is a fact, which we ignore at our peril.
- (3) The law of karma is unflinching. Everything we do has an effect and affects us.

And the fourth thought:

- (4) Cyclic life is undependable. We will never get our ducks all in a row. Not ever.

These four thoughts were the Buddhist teachings that first got my absolute attention because I had been thinking almost the same things myself from studying the laws of nature as a kid. However, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about?

This fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them. That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This is not uncommon.

With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful.

And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully.

Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy.

We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here:

Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it. And that approach or path is "awareness." In fact the word "Buddha," in ancient Sanskrit, simply means "aware one" or "awakened one." It is all a question of awareness. We are all aware, but to what degree?

The Buddha's entire path or method, which is called the "dharma" is about one thing only, waking up, becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will.

Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and can't seem to control it, can't get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.

So the point is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me

daily in a useful and successful manner.

It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me:

Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the inner tube?

That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind.

That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind works.