

## DOGMAS

by Piya Tan

Dogmas harmful to mental health—why so?

What are dogmas, in the first place? Firstly, they are opinions, that is, a teaching, belief or rule laid down by a person or group which others have to accept without question.

The Buddha began his religious life with the great questions of life: What is life? Why suffering? How to end suffering? What is happiness? After the Buddha's awakening, he advises his followers to continue question in this manner.

To question effectively, we have to observe carefully. They are inseparable. This careful observation is famously known as "mindfulness." Meditation is as important as a very effective way of observation or mindfulness which prepares us for a direct knowledge and vision of true reality.

What are our tools for observation? There are six of them: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. The eye sees form, the ear hears sounds, the nose smells odours, the tongue tastes, the body feels touches, and the mind manages all these experiences and also has its own mental images.

What can we observe? We can only observe the sense-objects: forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and mind processes. Whatever happens, can only happen within these six sense-fields. This is not to say that nothing exists beyond the six senses and the six sense-objects. For example, even if I were to close my eyes, or were to go away, my room will still be there.

The point is such situations or problems are for philosophical discussion. They have no function in the awakening process leading to mental liberation. That process lies in understanding how the six senses and the six sense-objects work in our consciousness.

When we do this, we find that our consciousness (here it is easier if we limit it to "attention") tries to go a thousand ways. We easily become distracted. If you are observant enough, you will notice that our attention would mostly go into the past, and sometimes into the future, but rarely lives in the present moment!

Understanding this uprooted nature of our consciousness is the beginning of knowledge and vision of true reality. In terms of practice, all Buddhist teachings lead one thing: present-moment awareness. Watch the present moment, and do so again and again, and carefully. What do we see?

If our ideas are fixed or our minds unclear, we will only see the shifting shadows of the past, and blinding colours of the future, and these can be very noisy. When we focus on the present

moment (such as doing breath meditation), these shadows, colourings and noises recede into the background, settling like dirt in settled water. Our minds become calmer and clearer.

There are various ways of talking of what we see in the calm and clarity of the present moment. One popular way in the Suttas is that of the five aggregates. All that we can know and see are as follows:

- (1) The body: this is impermanent, changing all the time, becoming other than what we wish.
- (2) When there is a body, there are feelings (like, dislike, neutral).
- (3) These feelings arise dependent of how we recognize our present sense-experiences: when we relate it to something nice in the past, we interpret it as “nice,” and so on. The present quickly becomes the past.
- (4) We are caught in this opinion-cycle, and keep on forming new opinions, which are often biased by like, dislike, or unconcern.
- (5) All this happens as long as we direct our consciousness to them.

Considering all this dynamics, we should be able to understand why there are not dogmas in Buddhism. Because Buddhism is a life-long learning process. Try watching how a baby learns to walk. He has no dogmas: it just keeps on learning to walk, no matter how many times it falls, he gets up, and keeps moving. Then he walks and finally grows up into you!

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