

Not What We Believe, but How We Live

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

The Buddha warned his followers not to get caught up in ‘debates’. In his day, these were very popular it seems. Every full moon, in the bright glow of the cool tropical evening, people gathered at the shrines to hear religious teachers. Their views conflicted. There were materialist annihilationists, much as the atheists of today, and there were eternalists, much in the same way as present day ‘believers’. Talking about speculative beliefs, whether it is the materialist atheist who reduces everything to chemicals or the religionist belief in life everlasting, he warns us not to get caught up in ‘a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a vacillation of views, a fetter of views.’ M.2.8 The debates between religion and science tend to be about provable facts. Neurobiologists say that because certain parts of the brain light up and certain chemicals function as we experience emotions, that therefore these are emotions. But no-one experiences emotions as electro-chemical happenings. Believers and the Buddha talk of a soul, a subtle body, the mind-made body. Only those who have had such an experience can be sure of it. And then how are they going to prove it? If religion is about beliefs, statements of facts, then all we will do is repeat the well-worn arguments of ‘experts’. In the Sutta Nipata, one of the earliest collection of the Buddha’s Sayings he says ‘The one who is full of rigid views, puffed up with pride and arrogance, who deems himself ‘perfect’ (expert), becomes anointed in his own opinion ...’ SN IV.12.12 When I became interested in Buddhism, I wasn’t in search of a belief, but of a methodology that would help me out of the hole I’d got myself into. What was said, of course, made sense. But it was what I ‘did’, that led me to commit myself to Buddhadhamma. Such questions about rebirth and Nibbana weren’t important to me. I left them to stew. Maybe in time I’d find out. What mattered was how the practice of meditation and moment to moment mindfulness was revolutionising my life. And this of course meant to understand how I was creating my own suffering. The Buddha eschews philosophical or metaphysical questions. He’s not concerned as to why we suffer. I think it would have been of little interest to him to know about Darwin’s theory of evolution. How does it make life more meaningful, knowing we are biologically descended from early mammals? It may as well have been a potato. Or knowing that our psychology is based on early human experience as hunter gatherers? Since when did life become any safer? Religion is about how we live. This is dependent on our understanding. But it’s what we do that gives this understanding an experiential meaningfulness. Knowing all about mountain climbing is one thing. Actually climbing one is something else. So the question is, ‘What am I doing that is making my life more meaningful; what more meaningless?’

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