

BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TOWARDS CULTURE AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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Culture and religion are closely interwoven in any society. Culture is part and parcel of human life. Human values, skill, intelligence and aesthetic beauty can be seen through cultural practices. Culture is the expression of refined and beautified traditions adapted either to influence or to promote fine arts as a means to entertain. Cultural practices inspire the human mind. Human passions can be calmed, gratified and ennobled through cultural practices. The glory of Asia depends a great deal on its culture and in this respect, Buddhist culture has played a prominent role. Culture can also protect and promote a religion.

When we introduce religion through our cultural practices, our day- to-day religious activities will be more attractive and we will be able to influence others to follow it as a living religion. We can say that cultural practices that are religious in nature are the stepping stones to understanding the religious way of life. Those who are not religious minded at the beginning will eventually get used to attending and appreciating religious activities. By attending such activities people will gradually get the opportunity to improve proper religious knowledge and understanding .Otherwise they will tend to shun religion altogether.

If people are well-educated and have improved their understanding and are personally noble, it is not very important for them to actively participate in traditional or cultural activities to be religious. Religion can contribute a great deal to enrich culture. It may be true to say that in Asian countries generally, the practice of a religion is clearly linked to cultural activities. Dances, songs, art and drama very largely draw their inspiration from religious subjects. Without culture religious activities may turn out to be very dry and uninteresting. At the same time, when we practice Buddhism without disturbing other traditions or the followers of other religions, this form of tolerance and peaceful coexistence along with our respectable behavior and gentle attitude can also be regarded as a cultural aspect.

Today because of the atrocities that have been done and are still continuing in the name of the religion, many people have become disillusioned at the mention of the very word, "religion". Materialism, hypocrisy and fanaticism covered under the guise of religion have caused the greatest disaster in the history of mankind.

The true religious values are rapidly disappearing from the minds of men as they run in search of the occult and the mystical. The established great religions of the world are breaking into discrimination of forms and some people are even going all out to ridicule religion. The time has come for all religionists of today to get together to introduce religious values in their proper perspective, instead of merely arguing and quarrelling over the differences of religious ideologies and mythologies.

The aim of this article therefore is to assist in promoting a better understanding of the purpose of religion and religious tolerance from the Buddhist point of view. Hopefully through this we can show how Buddhism regards other religions and guide Buddhists on how to behave towards their followers. Hopefully non Buddhists will also gain a better understanding of what the Buddha taught on this subject.

The deep underlying purpose of all religions should be to encourage their followers to uphold and respect their own religion without in any way being disrespectful towards other religions .To this end , all enlightened and like minded fellow religionists must unite and must establish mutual understanding ,mutual co-operation and tolerance amongst ourselves in order to achieve religious harmony is fashionable nowadays to talk of religious tolerance and its importance but few , if any , ever pin-point a practical way to achieve it. It is to be hoped that in reading this article, the read would be able not only to obtain a clearer picture of religious tolerance but also attempt to promote it sincerely. The first step towards developing this attitude is to eradicate a sense of superiority about one's own religion ,to eliminate mutual suspicion ,religious prejudices and selfish motives, for the common good and upliftment of our respective religions .But before we go any further we should pause and reflect on this word “ tolerance” which is used very loosely nowadays. Tolerance implies ‘putting up with’ something we may dislike. An attitude like this can be very dangerous because it can lead to hypocrisy and a degree of religious chauvinism.

We cannot simply tolerate another religion and maintain our superior attitude with regard to our own .We must be able to deeply respect another view although we may not agree with it. It may be useful to recall the famous words of Lord Acton who said,” I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death , your right to say it”. What this means is that mere tolerance is not enough. What we need most urgently for our society today is for everyone to believe what he or she wants to believe without any hindrances from any quarter. This goes far beyond mere tolerances. It involves a deep respect for the beliefs of others.

This respect can only come about when we are prepared to study the beliefs of others and try to understand why they believe what they believe. it is only by studying other ways of thinking that we can strengthen our own beliefs. The purpose of a religion is to give human beings a sense of self worth, to recognize the right of each individual to enjoy both spiritual and worldly happiness. Religion aims to help people not only live a meaningful life in this world, but also to prepare one for a life after death. All fellow-religionists are working to achieve this common cause of human emancipation and enlightenment. The search for emancipation and enlightenment is the search for Truth.

Unfortunately, in our very midst, there are many religious practices and beliefs ,which are depicted or passed off as the Truth , when in fact they are far from being the Truth. Many practices have their origins in our remote past and have very little relevance to modern ways of thinking and living. As true religious followers we must have the courage and conviction to admit what is evidently a misconception and try to rectify it to conform to science and reasoning to meet requirements of Truth. We would be failing in our duty if we try to cling on to something, which we know is not the Truth. We are even wrong, if in the practice of our religious tolerance, we tolerate it without pointing out its failings, which do not conform to Truth.

In seeking truth we should discard our competitive attitudes and unite to work hand-in hand to achieve our noble aim of religious harmony for the well being of mankind. In the very first sermon that He delivered after his Enlightenment the Buddha said that one should abandon the belief that the mere observance of rites and rituals could lead one to liberation from the problems of human existence. In doing so the Buddha was warning his followers against the reliance of so called devotional religious observances, but he did not say that such practices were altogether bad. What he meant was that religious practices must be used merely as a means to an end. Such practices prepare a person to carry out the more important spiritual task which is to rid the mind of the defilements which are the cause of our suffering, namely delusion, craving and ill-will.

However although the Buddha pointed out that there was no religious value in many of the practices in India during his time, he was careful to advise his followers to support the Brahmins and other monks irrespective of their beliefs provided of course they were sincere and harmless religious people.

The Buddha advised his followers not to hurt or to cause injury to Sramana (monk) or a Brahmin .Here he has recognised monks and Brahmin as religious people. Again the Buddha said that when a person deceives a Brahmin or a monk or pauper, by telling a lie, this is a cause of the downfall of the person .Thus in advising his followers in this manner the Buddha has treated people of all methods without any discrimination. Today we must extend our courtesy and respect to every holy man who sincerely tries to follow his religion to the best of his understanding.

The aim of Buddhism is to guide everyone to lead a noble life without harming anyone, to cultivate humane qualities in order to maintain human dignity, to radiate all-embracing kindness without any discrimination, and to train the mind to avoid evil and to purify the mind to gain peace and happiness.

Buddhism is a religion ,which teaches people to 'live and let live' in the history of the world, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of propagating their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as hindrance to worldly progress and peace.

We need to point out that this attitude contrast to the behavior of some religious followers who ridicule and condemn the practice and beliefs of others without bothering to study these other beliefs and what they really mean beyond the external appearances. Condemning others out of ignorance is hardly the mark of civilize behavior and is certainly out of place in this age where information on every subject is readily available. The Buddhist attitude is to allow others to follow their beliefs in peace, to recognize the rights of others to freedom of thought.

In Buddhism there are no religious laws, commandments and religious punishments but only advices given by the Buddha without using any divine power. The Buddha repeatedly declared that he was not interested in telling people to reach heaven. His aim was to explain suffering its cause, the extinction of suffering and the path which leads to that extinction.

This approach does not require Faith, but Understanding and Effort. Therefore in Buddhism there are no divinely ordained laws and there is also no concept of sin and punishment .The immediate goal in following the path is to develop a noble human being who understands the benefits of personal discipline and mental culture. Buddhists do not follow any religious

principles not because of the fear of the Buddha, punishment or reward but by knowing and experiencing the negative effects of bad actions and positive result of good ones. When they follow this method as a natural way of life they allow others to live peacefully and happily.

Buddhism does not create fear and temptation for people to practice a religion because it does not believe in punishment in hell or reward in heaven. The Buddha's message was an invitation to all to join the fold of universal brotherhood to work in harmony for the welfare and happiness of mankind. He had no chosen people, and he did not regard himself as a chosen one.

The Buddha's first missionaries were Arahantas-the Perfect and Holy ones. They were noble human beings who by the sheer effort of their renunciation and mental training had gained Perfection. By perfection we mean that state when all delusion, greed and hatred has been eradicated from the mind and there is not even the slightest tendency to experience negative states like anger, jealousy ,fear, worry, doubt , restlessness and so on. In short Arahantas experience 'divine' states not in heaven after their deaths but in this life itself. Before sending out the first Perfected disciples, he advised them in the following manner:

"Go ye,O Bhikkhus , and wander forth for the gain of the many , for the welfare of the many ,in compassion for the world: for the good ,for the gain ,for the welfare of gods and men .Proclaim ,O monks, the sublime doctrine, preach ye a life of holiness .perfect and pure".

The Buddha was only concerned about showing the path to ultimate happiness. He was not concerned with founding a religion in his name. The Buddha wanted to show the people the difference between good and evil; he wanted to teach humans how to lead a happy, peaceful and righteous way of life. He never advised his disciples to convert people from one religion to another. His idea of conversion was to introduce a righteous, noble and religious way of life. In fact he said that the greatest miracle one could perform was to convert a wicked person into a virtuous one.

In the same way ideas are subjected to constant change and what was considered acceptable only decade ago may become ridiculously out of date tomorrow. If we want to avoid causing suffering to ourselves and others we must adapt to changing ideas and changing circumstances.

RELIGIOUS HARMONY:

We must have religious harmony to live peacefully without any violence in this world. Religious principles are intended for the whole of mankind. If any particular section of humanity does not follow the great virtues taught by religion –such as kindness, patience, tolerance and understanding,

it would be difficult for others to live peacefully. For some reason, religion has constantly been blamed for a great deal of humanity's problems.

Religions have been blamed for War, Racism, Discrimination of women, persecution and so on. But this is not really fair because we must clearly distinguished between the religious principles taught by the founders and the interpretation of these principles by certain religious leaders to further their own ends. Sometimes these unscrupulous people even turn against the followers of their own religion because they entertain different opinions from theirs.

What is important is for the people in their own religions to speak up against wrong doing and misinterpretation especially if these interpretations condone terrorism and the slaughter of innocents. Often these religious leaders ally themselves to powerful political figures who have no hesitation to kill and incite hatred just to get what they want.

It is quite natural for cunning and cruel people to take advantage of any kind of virtue ,but let us –religionists of today ,bear in mind that those who fight and shed blood in the name of religion , do not follow religious principles and do not serve the cause of humanity. They fight for their own personal gain or power by using the name of a religion. Those who truly practice a religion have no grounds to fight. They should settle their problems in a peaceful manner.

Followers must know that a true religion never encourages any form of violence under any circumstances. At the same time, racial discrimination should not arise when we practice our respective religions. Buddhists can live and work with other religionists without any discrimination .Although Buddhists were divided into different sects nearly 2000 years ago, so far they never had any sectarian violence or discrimination amongst themselves in any part of the world. Buddhism is the only religion that didn't declare war to introduce religion. Each person has three natures: the Animal, the Human and the Divine. The purpose of religion is to help human beings realize their divine nature. Ever since the beginning of time man has moved through various stages of evolution.

At first he was merely concerned with his basic survival needs to find food, shelter and to ensure that there were children who would continue the line of descendants. But the nature of the human being was such that the satisfaction of mere survival need was not enough. Going through various stages from creating a sense of belonging, seeking knowledge, developing the arts he finally arrived at the ultimate questions about existence.

Man's longing for answers to the three questions who am I, am I need and what I am doing here gave rise to various answers which eventually led to the development of religion. That is the purpose of every religion; to explain the workings of the universe and man's place in that universe.

Unfortunately these noble aims were forgotten and religion simply became a jumble of rituals and superstitious practices in the hands of unscrupulous leaders who gained power over the people by exploiting their superstition and ignorance. The time has come for religion to serve its original purpose of providing answers to the problems regarding our existence .Government should not use religion to gain political power . At the same time religion should not use political power to introduce religion .Different religions may have different beliefs and views regarding the beginning and the end of life, as well as different interpretations regarding the nature of ultimate salvation. But we should not bring forward such attitude to create conflict, confrontation, clashes to create misunderstanding.

There are many common virtues for religionists to introduce in theory and practice in the name of religion, so that people may lead a righteous, peaceful and cultured way of life. There is no need for us to belittle one another. If we do so, we would only pave the way for the anti-religious groups who are waiting to ridicule and condemn all religions. We should not behave in such a way as to show our hostile attitude to our co-religionists. If we so, people will say that religions encourage mankind to be divided.

Buddhist are not forbidden to give due respect to other religious teachers , nor are they restricted from visiting places of worship and attending religious services , other than Buddhism . They can show their full respect for other belief systems while maintaining their basic Buddhist principles. Buddhism encourages co-operation and understanding amongst the various religious denominations. From the Buddhist point of view, religious labels are not the most important aspects for people to be considered religious, but any person leading a respectable and harmless way of life can be regarded as religious. The methods used to introduce the teachings of the Buddha are rational and reasonable. The Buddha made his appeal through reason and experience. The teachings were presented with clear and impressive simplicity and yet kept free from religious and national narrowness and fanaticism. They have produced clear and sober-minded people. This method of presentation cleared doubts and removed superstitious beliefs. Thus did the teachings of the Buddha enlightened the hearts and minds The of the earnest seekers of Truth .The Buddhist attitude of tolerance and understanding convinced many great thinkers , philosophers , rationalists ,freethinkers and even agnostics to appreciate Buddhism as a peaceful way of life devoid of fear and superstition . If we, the religionists of today cannot get together to work in harmony without discrimination or hostility towards one another, the peace that we talk of would only remain as a dream.

References

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