

## BUDDHISM AND FREEDOM

By Teh Thean Choo, A.M.N.

*Buddhism is as much the religion of reason and meditation as that of freedom. The Founder Himself took particular pains at all times to stress the necessity for freedom from all 'sacrosanct religious authority'. He told his disciples, "Believe nothing just because you have been told it, or it is commonly believed, or because it is traditional or because you yourselves have imagined it. Do not believe what your Teacher tells you out of respect for the Teacher. But whatsoever, after due examination and analysis, you find to be conducive to the good, the benefit, the welfare of all beings – that doctrine believe and cling to, and take as your guide."*

*Small wonder then, with such a liberal and selfless Teacher, Buddhism has flourished through the ages since historic times and is, today, the religion of one-fifth of humanity: for it is, above all, THE religion that guides the aspirant towards the achievement of the greatest freedom – the ultimate freedom from all sorts of egocentric thought and craving, the achievement of that supreme goal, Nibbana – the 'selfless peace that passeth all understanding'.*

*Mr Teh Thean Choo, who is the popular President of the Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur and who has represented Malaysia on numerous occasions in international conferences on Buddhism, emphasizes in no uncertain terms here the above points. He also lays stress on the freedom of worship in Buddhism in this country and thinks aloud on what is good for a multi-religious (and, may I add, multi-lingual and multi-cultural) society, that we should not only value this freedom – the freedom of worship – but also 'create and foster inter-religious peace and harmony for the well-being of society and our country' and, more importantly, that we should 'accord the respect that is due to one another in their respective religious beliefs and practices'.*

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Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, we, the members of the Buddhist fraternity in this country are deeply appreciative of the liberality accorded us in the practice of our religion. We are free to carry out our religious practices without any let or hindrance. The freedom of worship, enshrined in the Constitution of our country, is noted with deep gratitude. All of us co-religionists should value this freedom accorded us and do our utmost to

create and foster inter-religious peace and harmony for the well-being of society and our country. To achieve this peaceful and harmonious ideal, all religious leaders should discard any lingering, inherent, religious prejudices, and work hand-in-hand with one another to resolve whatever problems that may arise and work for the attainment of a happy and harmonious society. In our multi-religious society, we should accord the respect that is due to one another in their respective religious beliefs and practices. We should not denigrate a particular religious practice for the simple reason that we belong to another religious denomination. Respect begets respect.

Buddhism, religion founded by a Sakya Prince in northern India, well over two thousand five hundred years ago, can be considered as one of the most liberal religions in the world today. Buddhism gives absolute freedom to all its followers in putting into practice the Teachings of Lord Buddha. Buddhism enjoins its devotees to follow the Pali dictum “Ehi-pasiko” which is interpreted as “to come, see and observe”. It does not insist that its followers should adopt or practise “blind faith” in the discharge of their duties, spiritual functions or rituals in relation to the putting into practice of the Dhamma or the Teachings of Lord Buddha. The followers of Buddhism are asked to utilise their inquiring minds to probe, question and debate on the pros and cons, on the utility or feasibility of certain teachings and practices before accepting such teachings and practices as their particular religion or faith. Such is the freedom accorded by Lord Buddha to all adherents.

Buddhism does not threaten or bind its devotees by strict laws or injunctions to conform to its tenets on pain of damnation in hell. Buddhism gives the freedom to its believers to study, analyse and even investigate all aspects of its Teachings and religious practices, before accepting them. A man is free to embrace Buddhism today and discard it tomorrow, if he is in any way dissatisfied with any aspect of it.

He will not be condemned, disowned or treated as an outcast by the Buddhist community. He is respected for the courage of his own convictions to embrace whatever religious denomination regarded by him as the Truth. Buddhism does not claim that it is the only religion that can help a man to gain spiritual salvation.

Buddhism strongly believes in the law of ‘Karma’ – the law of cause and effect. Buddhism believes that you ‘reap what you sow’. You do good and you acquire merit. You do evil and you get your just desserts. You may be a Muslim, a Christian, a Hindu or of any other religious denomination or faith; but if you follow the dictum to do good wherever and whenever you can, you are given

that respect that is due to a respectable religious personality – a man of peace and goodwill.

All members of the Buddhist fraternity are enjoined to show a measure of respect to all other co-religionists – to respect them for their teachings, beliefs and practices and to respect them for the invaluable contribution their particular religion is contributing for the good of society and the country. Another significant freedom that is accorded to members of the Buddhist fraternity is that they are free to accord respect and veneration to the founders or religious leaders of other religious denominations. Buddhism believes that the founders or religious leaders of other religious denominations, through their own ways and means, had contributed their valuable share for the progress and spiritual well-being of mankind, through spiritual solace and spiritual upliftment. They had done a world of good to humanity and deserved to be given the respect and honour that is due to a revered spiritual leader of the world.

In matters pertaining to social welfare activities, all Buddhists are freely encouraged to work hand-in-hand with other co-religionists for the growth and well-being of society. The poor, the aged and the handicapped, irrespective of race or creed, needs assistance, either spiritually or materially. We should render whatever help we can, in concert with others, to alleviate their sufferings. To help the poor and needy is considered one of the greatest meritorious acts that can be performed by Buddhists.

Buddhism does not impose stringent dogmatic restrictions for its followers to conform on penalty of punishment, in the day-to-day functions and observances in a Buddhist family. A Buddhist family is given the freedom to observe its traditional rites and rituals, handed down from time immemorial. Although certain Buddhist organisations have laid down certain guidelines for Buddhists to follow in respect of certain family happenings such as birth, death, marriages, illnesses and other related religious observances, a Buddhist family has the complete freedom to observe any particular traditional rites and rituals or religious observances that it so desires, without being hauled up for an infringement of some Buddhist tenets. For a marriage ceremony, a couple is enjoined to call at a Buddhist Temple to seek spiritual solace and to receive Blessings from the Triple Gem. This is only a request and not a strict injunction. It is left to the choice of the family concerned to observe or disregard. Such is the freedom accorded by Buddhism. In regard to the demise of a person, Buddhism does not insist that the body be cremated or buried. The freedom of choice is left to the family concerned. No hard and fast rule is laid down by Buddhism in respect of type of food to be consumed by a Buddhist. He is free to consume any type of food for the sustenance of his body. However, he is

requested, through the injunctions of one of the precepts, to refrain from taking intoxicating drinks that might injure his health.

From the examples given, hereon, it can easily be gauged that Buddhism, despite its precepts and injunctions, accords freedom to its adherents, to such a latitude that no other religious denomination would accord. In one of His discourses, Lord Buddha went to the extent of advising His followers not to accept His Teachings for the simple reason that He was a renowned Teacher. He advised His followers to think carefully and be judicious in the acceptance of Teachings given to them. He exhorted them to weigh all the pros and cons and decide for themselves that which is good to be accepted and that which is not good to be discarded. He had abundant faith in His followers, who, in turn, had abundant faith in the Great Teacher. Despite all the gracious freedom enjoyed by Buddhists, Buddhism has won a niche in the world of religions with millions of devotees in all parts of the world, voluntarily upholding the noble precepts of the Great Teacher, and searching for the path leading to full enlightenment and to ultimate FREEDOM – NIRVANA.