

BUDDHISM AS A WORLD RELIGION

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What is a world religion? Any religion – Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam – can claim this title. When Pope Paul VI visited Bombay, a Muslim went and offered him a copy of the Koran saying that what the world needed was Islam. So, what is a world religion? It is not merely a religion that spreads throughout the world, but a religion that can lead the world towards freedom and progress ‘both spiritually and materially, ethically and intellectually, and economically.’

Now, in my opinion, and as I conceive it, for a religion to be a world religion, certain conditions are necessary. There are, in my opinion, three important aspects necessary for a world religion. First: moral and ethical; second: philosophical and intellectual; third: social and economic. If a religion is to be considered a world religion, it must satisfy all these three conditions. People generally conceive religion only as a spiritual movement but to me religion is much more than that. Spiritual force is only one aspect. A religion, a world religion, must touch all aspects of human life, not only spiritual, but also intellectual, economic, social and political. Otherwise it cannot be a world religion.

Buddhism is the first missionary religion in history. I don't like this word “missionary”. It has such a stigma, such a stain attached to it that I dislike the term. But, I beg your pardon, I used it for the sake of convenience.

A few months after the Enlightenment of the Buddha, when he had 60 disciples, he admonished them to go out into the world and spread among people the Dhamma, the Message of Truth and Wisdom, the Message of Love and Peace, “for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many”. That was in the 6th century B.C. Since that time, the bhikkhus, the Buddha's disciples went wherever it was possible, crossing the mountains, rivers and deserts, spreading peacefully the compassionate Teaching of the Buddha. But, Buddhism became a massive force, a world movement, only after Asoka, the great Buddhist emperor of India. That was in the 3rd century B.C. Asoka embraced Buddhism, made it the state religion of his vast empire, and sent missions to many parts of the World, including Ceylon, and also certain Greek territories in the West. After Asoka Buddhism became an international factor, a world movement, a world religion. During the following centuries it spread throughout Asia, and also beyond Asia. By about the 7th century A.C. Buddhism spread into practically every country in Asia – Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos,

Vietnam, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and some parts of Russia, and it produced tremendous works of art, architecture and literature in those countries.

We do not know what happened to Buddhism in the West in that distant past. We are only sure that Buddhism was known to the West as early as the 3rd century B.C. and the historians believe that early Christianity was influenced by Buddhist practices, and that even Christian monastic life was influenced by Buddhist monarchism. Whatever it may be, we know very little about Buddhism in the West in those early days. After a silence of many centuries, the West began to hear of Buddhism again about the beginning of the 16th century.

Today Buddhism is becoming more and more attractive to the world, particularly to the Western world. But I don't want to exaggerate it. You might have heard from some bhikkhus and laymen who go for a short visit to the West and come back home and say that Buddhism is spreading rapidly in the West. Don't believe these enthusiastic stories. It is true there is some interest among certain intellectuals, some students, and also among some others who are dissatisfied with their traditional religion. But they are not very many.

Buddhism cannot be established in the West as we practise it in Theravada countries like Ceylon, Burma, Thailand or Cambodia, or in Mahayana countries like Tibet, Japan, China or Korea. That form of Buddhism with all its local and traditional customs, ceremonies and rituals, will never spread in the West. If Buddhism is established in any country in the West, it will take another form suitable to the conditions there. What will happen, as far as I can see, is that Buddhism, as a moral and intellectual force, influencing the minds of men, of thinking people, will spread in the world, and it is already spreading. This is not visible like a Buddhist centre or a temple established in a city. It is subtle, and it has far-reaching effects. It is the essence of Buddhism.

Whether you sit on chairs or on mats on a religious occasion, whether you enter a shrine room with or without shoes, these have nothing to do with real Buddhism. These are local customs peculiar to geographical regions. Once I had to preside at a Buddhist function at a Ceylon embassy in a Western capital. (I don't want to mention the place.) In the room arranged for the function, Ceylon mats were spread on the floor for the audience to sit. I told the secretary that this kind of practice wouldn't work in the West, that mats should not be mixed up with Buddhism, and that people in the West in their western clothes and shoes couldn't sit on mats comfortably. The secretary said that they appreciated and enjoyed this change. I explained to him that when a function like this was arranged by an embassy, people who are invited to attend it,

wouldn't say anything against it, wouldn't criticize it, they would simply pretend to appreciate it out of politeness. Trying to introduce this kind of our local customs and practices will only hinder the progress of Buddhism over there. People in the West will think that Buddhism is an out-dated and out-moded religion, good enough for crazy old women, superstitious people in villages, but not for technically advanced, progressive countries, not for intelligent people.

This I relate to you as an example. This applies to many of our local customs and practices associated with Buddhism. This is only a side issue. What I want to discuss are those three aspects of religion I mentioned at the beginning. If Buddhism is going to stand, going to live, going to survive in the modern world, it must satisfy people in these three aspects.

Today people are afraid, worried and anxious that religion is in danger. There are slogans all over the world to save and protect religion from this -ism or that -ism. But I have no such fear about this. If religion is necessary for humanity, if the world needs it, it cannot disappear, it cannot be destroyed by anyone, it cannot be destroyed by any -ism. If it can be destroyed by any -ism, that means that religion has outlived its use and its value. And then it must certainly disappear. If religion disappears because of another force, that means that religion has become anachronistic, has no more value for the world, and that the new force satisfies the needs of people better. Whatever has disappeared in history has disappeared when it had outlived its use, its value, when it could not adapt itself to changing conditions. So if Buddhism or any religion must disappear, or will disappear, it will be because it has no use for the world, no use for humanity. Therefore, I wouldn't lament, I wouldn't regret it if religion disappears when, and if, it has become a hindrance to human freedom and progress. If a religion disappears from the world when humanity progresses intellectually, morally, economically and politically, it means that religion is reactionary and harmful, and is a hindrance to progress, and is no use for the world. Therefore it must disappear, and we must applaud its disappearance for the good of humanity. Religion is for man, and not man for religion. If and when religion obstructs man's freedom and progress, it must disappear.

Now, about the three aspects of Buddhism as a world religion. First: Its moral and ethical aspects. You all know that Buddhism is based on Great Compassion, on Universal Love. This is the most important and fundamental basis of Buddhism. Without this Great Compassion there would be no Buddhism. In this Great Compassion, there is no idea of self; in it the self disappears. Here I am not referring to the Anatta doctrine, that subtle, philosophical and metaphysical question. That is a different matter. Here I am talking of Compassion, according to Buddhism. In this Compassion, as I told you, there is

no place for self; one sacrifices one's self-interest for others; one renounces even one's own salvation, one's own Nirvana for the sake of others. This is the highest conceivable ethical and moral ideal, the highest charity. According to both Theravada and Mahayana, the Bodhisattva ideal is to give up one's own Nirvana which is within one's reach, which one can attain, and to remain and suffer Samsara in order to help others, in order to lead others to salvation. This is done out of Great Compassion for others.

This selfless Compassion is the basis of all moral and ethical conduct in Buddhism. Out of this Compassion arise all ethical and moral precepts, social service, social justice, social welfare. Equality, brotherhood, tolerance, understanding, respect for life, respect for other's views, respect for other's religions – all these have their roots in this Compassion. You must have read in the newspapers that the Vatican Council, after long hesitation, has at last approved religious freedom in a way. Whether they approve it or not, the world is moving towards religious freedom. So it is wise to recognize it than to oppose it. In the history of the Catholic Church, however, this is a revolution. Buddhism has been preaching and practising it during the last 25 centuries.

Based on this Great Compassion, Buddhism has always been a religion of peace. Its long history is free from the stains of religious wars, religious persecutions and inquisitions. Buddhism in this respect stands unique in the history of religions. Buddhist teaching of peace and non-violence, tolerance and understanding, is extremely important for the world today.

The second is the intellectual and philosophical aspect of religion. Religion, as popularly understood, is mostly associated with superstition. When people cry that religion is disappearing, that religion is in danger, then, as I understand it, superstition is disappearing, superstition is in danger. With educational, scientific and intellectual progress in the world, that kind of religion is certainly in danger, and must disappear – for the good of humanity. This is the reason why this philosophical and intellectual aspect is important for a world religion today. Otherwise it cannot survive. It must disappear.

In Buddhism, as you all know, freedom of thought, freedom of inquiry, is a great idea. There is no obligation, no compulsion, to believe or accept any dogmas. Even the Buddha's words should not be accepted without examining and understanding. The Buddha himself said that even the Tathagata should be examined. To this freedom of thought there is no limit. It is limitless freedom of thought. Buddhism is not a faith or a belief in a God or in Revelation. In it there are no dogmas and no beliefs. It is seeing; it is understanding; it is a scientific attitude of mind. Fundamental philosophical doctrines taught in Buddhism are being more and more corroborated by new scientific discoveries.

In the light of the latest studies of the atom, the old conception of the world is radically changing, and the conception of the atom itself is changing. There is no more matter as it was considered in the past, and it is reduced to energy, and energy is also disappearing gradually and the scientists themselves do not know what to call it. They are now coming to the conclusion that the atom is only a conception and subsequently the world too is nothing but a conception. The more they make researches into the structure of the atom, the more they come to this conclusion.

Now, you will be surprised that in Buddhism this theory was expounded at least 16 centuries ago, if not earlier. In the 4th century A.C., the great Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Asanga, based on the original Canonical texts, developed a theory known as Vijnaptimatra or Cittamatra, which enunciates that this world is just a conception, just a thought, just an idea. In order to prove this theory, Asanga had to define the atom, and his definition, made 16 centuries ago, is still valid up to this day which is really astonishing and astounding. Some scientists at Saclay, the Atomic Research Centre near Paris, where I had the opportunity to spend a day with them, admitted that modern science has not gone beyond this definition.

Asanga, in his *Abhidharmasamuccaya*, a very important Mahayana Buddhist philosophical text, (which I have translated for the first time both into English and into French, and is ready for publication), defines the atom as follows: "The atom (paramanu) should be understood as not having a (physical) body (nihsarira). The determination of the atom is done by the intellect through the ultimate analysis of mass of matter." Asanga's interest was not physics. His interest was metaphysical and philosophical. His interest was to show that this world, which ordinary people take as substance, was nothing real, but it was only a conception, an idea. He includes the atom among the objects of mind, like ideas, thoughts, conceptions, but not among the objects of physical sense organs (eye, ear, etc.) like colours, sounds, etc. He says all things in this world are composed of atoms. If the atom is a mental conception, then the whole world which is composed of atoms is also a mental conception; it is just a thought; it is just an idea.

Now, this theory is gaining ground, gaining support more and more in the scientific world today. This is one example of philosophical and intellectual aspect of Buddhism. There are many others, but I have no time to discuss them here and now.

The third is the attitude to social and economic problems. When you talk of religion, you don't take into account its relation or its influence on, social

economic and political life. People generally consider religion as an escape or withdrawal from active life. To them religion is retiring into a temple, or into a cave, or into a forest, and lead a life cut off from society. That kind of religion has no place at least in the world today. You think that in the Buddha's time religion was like that. Certainly not. You know the Buddha was one of the hardest working men that ever lived in this world. He slept only two and a half hours a night. And the rest of the time he worked. What did he do? He went all over the country, met people, talked to them and taught them. He did not talk all the time of Nirvana to everybody he met; many people did not understand those subtle metaphysical and philosophical questions. He spoke to them according to the level of their evolution on various subjects and helped them on their way to progress gradually. The Buddha himself said that he would not expect a beginner to realize the highest Truth at once. He said his was a gradual Path. Therefore helping people in various ways according to their standard of evolution and progress is part of religion.

If religion is to be lived or practiced away from this workaday world of ours, it is an escape, a deception. If you think you could practise Buddhism or any other religion only one hour or two hours a week on a special day like poyaday or Sunday, and that you could realize Nirvana or God by that practice, then, I think, that Nirvana or God is worth nothing very much. The Ultimate Truth or Nirvana has to be realized in our daily life, in our daily work, in living the life and not running away from it. Hence, social, economic and political life cannot be separated from true religious life. That is why social and economic aspects have to be considered when talking about a world religion.

Please don't misunderstand me. This should not be confused with the exploitation of religion by unscrupulous politicians. The exploitation of religion by politicians must be vehemently condemned. You should try to protect religion not from this or that -ism, but from those politicians who exploit it for their political power. They talk of protecting Buddhism, only to gain political power.

You may have heard that Christians in the West also are today greatly interested in protecting Buddhism from these -isms. I have recently read a book called "Buddhism or Communism?", sent to me for review by the publishers in America. The author is a German Christian theologian. He is greatly interested in protecting Buddhism from Communism. Not only our Buddhists here, in Ceylon, but even the Christians in Europe, are deeply interested in protecting Buddhism from Communism. You see, what is happening is that Christianity is losing a battle, and they are trying to use Buddhism also as a weapon. They don't care what happens to Buddhism; they want only to make use of it as a check, as a weapon, to fight a battle for them. That is the secret.

We must accept the fact that the world is moving towards socialism. Whether you like it or not, it is moving there. What is socialism is difficult to define today. Socialism is defined by various people in different ways. All Communist countries call themselves socialist countries. The Soviet Union is composed of Socialist Republics. Scandinavian countries are socialists. I hear in Ceylon, too, all political parties now claim to be socialists, in one or the other sense. So we are all moving towards socialism.

Any religion that must live in this world in future must recognize and must be in harmony with this change, this social and economic change. If a religion cannot progress with these changes, that religion will lag behind, will be left behind, and will die a debilitating death and disappear. If Buddhism must live in future, if it must be a world religion, it must move towards that social idea. If any religion, tries to hinder it, it will certainly be defeated, because nothing can stop that change and progress. You know that certain religions in the past have tried to stop social and scientific progress, but they couldn't do it. Buddhism is not such a narrow-minded and reactionary religion.

You will be surprised to hear that 25 centuries ago, the Buddha said that poverty was one of the causes of crime in this world. He said that crimes could not be suppressed or eradicated by punishment. Rulers in those days, just like the government of today, tried to suppress crimes by punishment. The Buddha said that it was futile, and instead of punishment the economic standard of the people should be raised. Then people would be satisfied and crimes would be reduced. In order to get rid of crimes, violence and wars, economic justice must be done. This is the latest economic and social theory, and the Buddha announced it 25 centuries ago.

Buddhism has all the necessary qualities to be a universal religion in a socialistic world, which is the future, if only we practise it and present it in its true spirit. Many people say that in Ceylon Buddhism is flourishing. Buddhists are very active, alive and enlightened. They want to spread Buddhism throughout the world and to make it a world religion, and all that sort of thing. But what I have heard and seen these days, during my short visit after 15 years, is depressing and distressing. I have seen in the newspapers photographs of some bhikkhus in a Devale, praying to some local gods asking them to prevent the Government from printing and publishing school text books. I am not expressing here any opinion about the proposed Government policy of publishing text books. My question is, my difficulty is, how could any bhikkhu without self-respect, without respect for the yellow robe he is wearing, go before a Devale, before some imaginary god or gods, and pray and ask them to stop this printing and publishing, I really don't understand. If these bhikkhus

honestly believe that there are gods of this kind who can interfere with the Government, then they are absolutely superstitious, and they don't know what Buddhism is. If they do it just to influence the ignorant masses without believing what they do, then they are dishonest and misleading people. Anyway it is very sad and depressing. I read in the papers that a statue of the Buddha at the Dalada Maligava (Tooth Relic Temple) in Kandy was sweating and perspiring a few days ago. No wonder even a statue of the Buddha perspires when such things happen!

How can we appear as Buddhist? People outside, particularly in the West, think that Ceylon is the country where pure form of Buddhism flourishes. This is the pure form of Buddhism that flourishes! If we talk of Buddhism as a world religion, then we must follow and practise it, and set an example before the world. By following and practising Buddhism I don't mean having big festivals, pinkamas and peraheras.

Those who lament Buddhism will disappear because of this or that-ism are really thinking of such superstitious practices, wasteful festivals and pinkamas, and things of that nature. But they have little to do with true Buddhism. True Buddhism is a way of life based on Compassion and Wisdom, and that is what I consider to be a world religion.