

# **BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS HARMONY**

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Buddhism ranks as one of the greatest and richest civilization the world has ever known. It has a wonderful history of achievement in the realm of literature, art, philosophy, ethics and the social and educational sciences which in the course of centuries, has brought into being the great nations whose allegiance it had won. From the very outset Buddhism appealed most strongly to the intellectual. The history of Buddhism has been written with golden letters of brotherhood, goodwill, tolerance and patience. The teachings of the Buddha could be qualified as one of "come and see" and not just "come and believe", because this is a religion to practise, and not one to have faith only.

Buddhists in this country have done their part by advising the people to practise these great qualities to live happily and peacefully with their fellow religionists. One of the fundamental teachings of the Buddha is to live happily and peacefully and allow others also to live happily and peacefully. Buddhism never preached its followers to condemn and hate the followers of other faiths. The tolerance shown by the Buddhists for the last 2500 years is indeed remarkable. The Buddha even advised his followers to accept the teachings of other religions if they actually found truth in them. Therefore Buddhists do not believe that they are the only blessed people who could find peace and happiness during this life time and hereafter. Buddhists were taught to respect every religion in this world without showing any discrimination,

By following this advice of the Buddha, Emperor Asoka who sent Buddhist missionaries to many parts of the world, had engraved the following statement in one of his edicts:

"One should not honour only one's own religion and condemn the religions of other, but one should honour others' religions for this or that reason. In so doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one digs the grave of one's own religion and also does harm to other religions. Whosoever honours his own religion and condemns other religions, does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking "I will glorify my own religion." But on the contrary, in so doing he injures his own

religion more gravely. So concord is good. "Let all listen, and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others."

People merely talk of religion. They do not take the trouble to live in accordance with the teachings of the religion. If Christians live by the Sermon on the Mount, if Buddhists follow the Noble Eight-Fold Path, if Muslims follow the teachings of the Prophet, and if the Hindus shape their life in accordance with the Teachings of the Saints and Sages, there will be peace everywhere."

All over the world great Conferences are held for bringing about universal peace, universal brotherhood and religious unity. But it is regrettable to mention that still greed, hatred, ignorance, misunderstanding, jealousy and so many other weaknesses are prevailing in their minds. Man must learn how to respect the other man's views also. He must at least agree to disagree without adopting a violent and aggressive attitude towards other man's views. If we want to reform or correct the world, we must correct ourselves first.

Buddhism is a completely elaborated scheme of practical life and a carefully thought-out plan of inward self-culture. It is indeed more than that; it is a scientific method of education. This religion is best able in any crisis to restore our peace of mind and to help us to face calmly whatever changes the future may have in store. The Buddha once said: "Knowledge is the key to a high path; knowledge is that which brings calmness and peace to life, which renders man indifferent to the storms of the phenomenal world." As a civilized force, Buddhism tamed the wild and refined the tamed.

The discovery of the middle path for the Buddhist way of life is another glaring truth in this religion. Buddha advised his followers to practise this religion without going into extremes of either sensual pleasure or self-mortification. This righteous way of living is appreciated by every cultured man today. The Noble Eightfold Path taught by the Buddha could be practised by anyone without even having any religious brand. They are: Right understanding, Right thought, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness and Right concentration. Buddha once said: "Though one should live hundred years immoral and unrestrained, yet, better indeed, is one day's life of one who is virtuous and understanding." According to the Buddha, there is no virtue better than the cultivation of universal love, no happiness sweeter than mental tranquility, no truth clearer than the understanding of cosmic law, no religion higher than moral and intellectual development, and no philosophy greater than that which teaches the production of immediate results visible to one's self and others.

There are some who believe that Buddhism is too lofty and sublime a system that it cannot be practised by the ordinary man and woman in this present workaday life of ours, and that to do so one has to retire from society and seek seclusion in a monastery, or some other quiet place. This is a sad misconception, due evidently to a lack of understanding of the Teachings of the Buddha.

To introduce this religion the Buddha adopted a very liberal method which is appreciated today by the great thinkers. He advised many people who came to him to embrace his religion not to do so hastily but asked them to think carefully whether his way of teaching would appeal to them and be practicable. If the devotees were fully convinced with his method of teaching then only he would allow them to accept his religion. Even after becoming his followers, he advised them to continue to support their previous religions to which they once belonged. This only goes to show the extent of freedom he gave to his followers without harbouring any jealousy towards other religions. A Buddhist is a free man with an open mind and is not subservient to anyone for his spiritual development.

He also advised his followers not to accept or believe anything by way of traditions merely because they have been handed down from generation to generation; not to believe in anything just because it has been spoken of by many; not to believe because a written statement of some old sage is produced; not to believe in what they have fancied; or thinking that just because it is extra-ordinary it must therefore have been implanted by someone who is powerful. Only after observation and analysis, if it agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, may one accept it and live up to it.

Further he says: "If anyone were to speak ill of me, my doctrine or my disciples, do not bear any ill-will towards him, do not be upset or be perturbed at heart, for if you were to be so it will only cause you harm. On the other hand if anyone were to speak well of me, my doctrine and my disciples, do not be overjoyed, thrilled or be elated at heart, for if you should be so it will only be an obstacle in your way of forming a correct judgement as to whether the qualities so praised are indeed real and actually found in us."

The materialistic philosophy of annihilation is rejected by the Buddha. The doctrine of Karma is sufficient to prove that Buddha did not teach annihilation after death. Morality, self-discipline, self-training, mental culture, concentration and the Precepts are important factors of his Teaching,

The people of the world today are restless weary and raked with fear and discontentment. They are intoxicated with the desire to gain fame, wealth, power and the gratification of the senses. To this troubled world, still seething with hate and distrust, the message of non-violence of the Buddha is a soothing balm. Although it is very difficult to practise, the Buddha advised us always to return good for evil, love for hatred. According to Buddha a man who follows his advice will always be cheerful when it is very difficult to be cheerful, and be patient when it is difficult to be patient and be silent when there are lots of worldly thing to talk about. “Not by hating does hatred cease; hatred ceases by love alone” says the Buddha. Such is the message given by this great Teacher 2500 years ago to those who preached the doctrine of antagonism and ill-will, setting men to war and rebellion against one another. Let us live happily and let others also live happily.

We are living in a world of really amazing contradictions; on the one hand people are afraid of war; and on the other, they hastily prepare for it. They produce weapons in abundance but these results in misery. Hence the world is getting more and more lonely. Men are living closely to each other as in a big family but each individual finds himself separated from his neighbour more than ever. Today the followers of all religions have a special duty for the establishment of peace in the world. Time has come for all religionists to be united and to make a religious front to work for the welfare of humanity. There are various forces at work against every religion. Therefore religion is in danger. Everyone must forget their religious differences and work together not in competition with each other but in close collaboration in order to preserve religion and to do a better service for the happiness of mankind.

The sincere respect of the other man’s religion will everywhere be held in high esteem. The religious tolerance prevailing in this country is remarkable and we are very fortunate in that respect.