

HOW TO CHOOSE A RELIGION

By Ven K Sri Dhammananda

One of the challenges faced by Buddhists today is the problem of being harassed by missionaries of other religions out to seek converts to their faiths. Part of the problem is created because most Buddhists themselves are notoriously ignorant about the Dhamma. If they were only aware of the uniqueness of the Buddha's teachings, their relevance to contemporary society and the "scientific" spirit of verification before acceptance which the Buddha advocated, they would not fall easy prey to those who introduce mere faith as religion. Unfortunately Buddhism's tolerance has been misinterpreted to mean complacency on the part of parents and religious leaders. In this article Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda writes eloquently about the Buddha's Kalama Sutta. The Kalama Sutta has rightly been called the "Magna Carta Of Religious Freedom". Buddhists can justifiably be proud of this only treatise to be found in any religion which truly encourages seekers after the truth to use the methods of investigation demanded by science before they accept the tenets of any religion. Young people especially will find this a useful article to help them in their choice of a religion which will not contradict the demands of modern society.

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During the time of the Buddha there was great intellectual activity in India. Some of the most intelligent people the world has ever known were actively engaged in the great religious controversies of the time. Was there a Creator? Was there no Creator? Was there a soul? Was there no soul? Was the world beginningless? Was there a beginning? These were some of the topics which were hotly debated by the ablest minds of the time. And of course, just like today, everyone claimed that he alone had all the answers and anyone who did not follow him would be damned and could go to hell! Naturally all this intense search for the truth only served to create more confusion. A group of earnest young men called the Kalamas went to the Buddha and told him about their confusion. They asked him what one should do before accepting or rejecting a teaching.

The Buddha's advice as mentioned in the *Kalama Sutta* is not to accept anything based upon mere reports, traditions or hearsay. Usually people develop faith after listening to others. They unthinkingly accept what others say about their religions or what is recorded in their religious books. Most people very seldom take the trouble to investigate, to find out whether what is said is true or not. This general attitude is hard to understand, especially in these modern times when a scientific education teaches people never to accept anything which cannot be explained rationally. Today even many so-called educated youths use only their emotion or devotion without using their sense of reasoning.

In the *Kalama Sutta* the Buddha gives very liberal advice to a group of young people on how to accept a religion in a rational manner. When these young people could not decide how to choose a proper religion they came to see the Buddha to seek his advice. They told him that since different religious groups introduce religion in different ways, they were confused and they could not understand which method was correct. These young people could be described in modern terms as free thinkers, or truth-seekers. That is why they decided to discuss this matter with the Buddha. They requested him to give some guidelines to help them find a reasonable religion through which they could find the truth.

In reply to their question, the Buddha did not claim that the Dhamma is the only teaching of value and anyone who believes anything else will go to hell. Instead, he gave some important advice for them to consider. The Buddha never encouraged people to accept a religion through mere faith but he encouraged them to consider and understand things without bias. He also did not encourage people to use emotion and mere devotion based on blind faith to accept a religion. That is why the religion based on his teaching often is described as a rational religion. It is also known as a religion of freedom and reason. We should not accept anything through faith or emotion to practise a religion. We should not accept a religion simply because it allays our ignorant fears about what will happen to us when we die or if we are threatened with hell-fire if we do not accept some teaching or other. Religion must be accepted through free choice. Each person must accept a religion with understanding and not because it is a law given by some authorities or supernatural powers. There must be a personal and rational conviction about the religion that is accepted.

People can make any kind of claim about their religions by exaggerating various incidents to influence others. Later, they can introduce them as divine messages to develop faith or confidence. But we have to read these writings analytically by using our common sense and powers of reasoning. That is why the Buddha

advised us not to accept anything hastily which is recorded, traditional or mere hearsay. People practise certain traditions which are based on beliefs, customs or the way of life of the community to which they belong. However, some traditions are very important and significant. Therefore, the Buddha did not condemn all traditions outright but advised us to consider very carefully whether any practice is meaningful or not. We must accept that certain traditions become out of date and meaningless after a period of time. This could be because many of them were introduced and practised by primitive people and their understanding about human life and nature was very limited at that time. So, today when we use our modern scientific education and knowledge of the universe we can see the nature of their beliefs. The beliefs that primitive people had about the sun, moon and the stars, the globe, the wind, thunder and lightning, rain and earthquakes were based on their attempts to explain these seemingly terrifying phenomena. They introduced them as gods or acts of a god and supernatural powers. With our advanced knowledge today, we can explain these seemingly terrifying phenomena for what they really are. That is why the Buddha has said, “Don’t accept what you hear at once. Don’t try to justify your irrational behaviour by saying that these are our traditions and we are bound to accept them”. We should not believe in superstition or dogma simply because our elders did so. This is not to say that we disrespect our elders, but we must move with the times. We should retain those beliefs which are compatible with modern ideas and values and reject anything which has become superfluous or irrelevant because times have changed. In this way we will be able to live richer lives.

A generation ago an Anglican minister, the Bishop of Woolich coined a phrase “God of the gaps” to explain that whatever we did not understand was attributed to a god. As our knowledge of the world expanded, the power of the god diminished correspondingly.

Everyone likes to listen to stories. Perhaps that is why people believe in hearsay. Assume that one hundred people have seen a particular incident and when each person repeats this incident to others, he will relate it in different ways by adding many more things and exaggerating the details. He will add more “salt and spice” to make it more appealing and interesting and to beautify it. Generally each person will tell the story as if he was the only one who can tell others what really happened. This is the nature of stories that people create and spread. When you read certain stories in any religion, please remember that most of those interpretations are just to decorate a minor incident to attract people. Otherwise, there will be nothing for them to tell others and no one will pay any attention to them. On the other hand stories can be very useful. They are an interesting way of

conveying moral lessons. Buddhist literature is a vast storehouse of such rich stories. But they are only stories. We must not believe them as if they are the absolute truth. We should not be like children who believe that wolves can swallow grandmothers alive and speak to human beings! People may talk about many kinds of miracles, gods and goddesses, angels and their powers according to their beliefs. Most people tend to accept them at once without any investigation, but according to the Buddha, we should not believe anything at once because those who tell us things are themselves deluded. The majority of people in this world are still in the dark and their understanding capacity of the truth is poor. Only very few people can understand things properly. How can the blind lead the blind? Then there is another saying “A one-eyed Jack can be King in a Kingdom of the blind.” Some people may know only the partial truth. We must beware of placing our absolute faith in them.

Next, the Buddha warned us not to believe anything upon the authority of religious texts or holy books. People always say that all those messages found in their holy books were conveyed directly by their god. Today, they try to introduce those books as messages from a heaven. It is difficult to believe that they received this message from heaven and recorded it in their holy books only a few thousand years ago. Why were these revelations not made earlier? (Considering that the planet earth is four and half billion years old). Why were they made only to certain favoured individuals? Surely it would have been much more effective to assemble a whole lot of people in one place and reveal the truth to a multitude rather than depend on one man to do the job. Better still should not their gods make physical appearances on certain important days in the year to prove their existence occasionally? That way they will have no trouble at all converting the whole world! Buddhists do not try to introduce the teaching of the Buddha as a divine message, and they preach without using any mystical powers. According to the Buddha, we should not accept even his teaching as recorded in the Buddhist scriptures blindly and without proper understanding. This is the remarkable freedom that the Buddha has given us. Although he never claimed that Buddhists are the chosen people of a god, he gave far greater credit for human intelligence than any other religion has done.

The best method for a rational person to follow to is to consider carefully before he accepts or rejects anything. Study, think, and investigate until you realise what it is. If you accept by depending only on authorities or holy books, you will never realise the truth for yourself.

“Not to depend upon logic and argument alone” is another advice of the Buddha. Do not think that your powers of reasoning are absolute. Otherwise, you will become proud and not listen to others who know more than you. Normally we advise people to use their sense of reasoning. Yes, by using their limited senses and minds, people unlike animals reason things for themselves. Even children and uneducated people use their reasoning powers according to their age, maturity, education and understanding. But these reasoning powers differ according to their maturity, knowledge and experience. Again, this kind of reasoning is subject to change from time to time. People’s identity or recognition of concepts also change from time to time. In such reasoning there is no final analysis or ultimate truth. Since we have no other choice, we have to use our extremely limited sense of reasoning for the time being until we gain proper understanding. Our aim should be to constantly develop our minds by being prepared to learn from others without giving in to blind faith. By exposing ourselves to different ways of thinking, by allowing our own beliefs to be challenged, by always keeping an open mind, we develop our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. The Buddha went to every teacher he could find before he gained final Enlightenment. Even then he did not accept everything that they taught. Instead, he used his own reasoning to understand the Truth. And when he gained Enlightenment, he never lost his temper or threatened anyone who did not agree with his Teaching.

Now let us consider argument or logic. Whenever we think that certain things are acceptable to us we say they are logical. Actually the art of logic is a valuable tool for argument. Logic can be exploited by talented orators who use intelligence and cunningness. One who knows how to talk can topple the truth and justice and defeat others. Lawyers argue in the court. Different religious groups argue to prove that their religion is better than the other religions. Their arguments are based on their talent and ability to express their ideas but they are not necessarily interested in the truth. This is the nature of argument. To arrive at the truth, the Buddha advised us not to be influenced by argument or logic but to use unbiased investigation. When people start their arguments, naturally their emotion also rises and this results in heated argument. Later human egoism adds more fire to this verbal battle. In the end it creates enmity because nobody wants to surrender his views. Therefore, no one should introduce the truth or a religion through argument. This is another important advice of the Buddha.

The next advice is not to accept anything as the absolute truth upon one’s own influence. This refers to the beliefs that are seen as truth through one’s own imagination. Although we have some doubts in our mind we accept certain things as truths after limited investigation. Since our minds are deluded by a lot of

desires and emotional feelings, this mental attitude creates illusion. And we also have our intrinsic ignorance. Everyone suffers from ignorance and illusion. Mental defilements cloud the mind which then become biased and cannot distinguish between truth and illusion. As a result, we become convinced that only our beliefs are correct. The Buddha's advice is not to come to any conclusion at once by using our emotional feeling but to get more information and investigate before we come to any conclusion about something. This means we must be willing to hear what other people have to say. Perhaps they can clarify our doubts and help us to recognize the fallacy of what we believe as being true. An example of this is that at one time people used to say that the sun goes around the earth which they believed was flat, like a coin. This was based on their limited knowledge but they were prepared to burn anyone alive who dared to present another viewpoint. Thanks to our Enlightened Teacher, Buddhism has no such dark records in its history where people were not allowed to challenge anything which was unreasonable. This is why so many schools of Buddhism co-exist amicably without condemning each other. Based on the Buddha's clear instructions Buddhists respect other people's right to hold different views.

The next advice is not to accept anything which appears to be true. When you see things and listen to some interpretation given by others, you grasp only the external appearance of the objects without using your penetrative knowledge. Sometimes the concept or identity that you create about the object is far from the intrinsic truth about it. Try to see things in a proper perspective. Buddhism is known as the Doctrine of Analysis. Only through analysis can we understand what really constitutes the object and what sort of elements and energies are functioning and how they exist, why they decay and disappear. If you really examine the nature of these things you will realise that everything that exists is impermanent and that attachment towards these objects can create more disappointments. Again, you will realise that there is no point in fighting about ideas when in the final analysis all is but illusion, when seen in their true perspective. Buddhists are not caught up in the controversies regarding when the world will end because they see that ultimately all compounded things will disintegrate. The world will end. There is no doubt about that. We end every time we breathe in and out. The end of the world (predicted by the Buddha) will merely be a dramatic occurrence of something that happens in our daily existence. And modern astronomy tells us that worlds are blowing up all the time. "They do not worry about the past; they do not worry about the future. They remain contented in the present. Therefore they are serene" (*The Buddha*). When we know this fact, the end of the world is not so terrifying or even worth worrying about.

The Buddha then warns his followers not to rely upon one's own speculative experience. After listening to or reading certain theories, people simply arrive at certain conclusions and maintain these beliefs. They fiercely refuse to change their views because their minds are made up or because once "converted" to a certain belief, they have been warned they will burn in hell if they change their convictions. In ignorance and fear these poor people live in a fool's paradise thinking that their sins are miraculously forgiven. The Buddha's advice is not to make any hasty conclusions to decide whether such things are true or otherwise. People can discover many things in this world but the most difficult thing for them to discern is the truth or reality of all compounded things. We should not depend on speculative rumours to understand the truth. We may accept certain things as the basis on which to begin an investigation which will ultimately satisfy inquisitive minds. The decisions that we arrive at through speculation can be compared to the decision made by a group of blind men who touched different parts of the body of an elephant. Each man had his own decision regarding what he thought the elephant looked like. To each, what he said was true. Although those who could see things knew that they were all wrong, in their minds they thought they were right. Also do not be like the proverbial frog under a coconut shell, who thought there was no world beyond what he could see.

We are blinded by our mental defilements. That is why we cannot understand the truth. That is why others can mislead and influence us very easily. We always go on changing the beliefs that we have accepted as truth because we have not grasped the ultimate. People change their religious labels from time to time because they are easily influenced by human emotion. When once we have realised the ultimate truth, we need never change it under any circumstances because in the final truth there is nothing to change, it is Absolute.

We should not change our views simply because we are impressed by another's seeming ability is the next advice the Buddha gave to the young people called the Kalamas. Some people have the ability to impress you by their behaviour and apparent ability to do certain things. For example, would you blindly believe the girl in a television commercial who tells you that you too can become as beautiful as her, have teeth as beautiful as hers if you use a certain brand of toothpaste? Of course not! You would not accept what she says without examining carefully the validity of her statements. It is the same with those glib talkers who knock on your door to tell you glamorous stories about their "truth". They may talk about various religious teachers, gurus and meditation masters. They will also indulge in some exaggeration to prove the powers of their teachers to influence your mind. If you blindly accept their sayings as Truth, you will maintain very shaky and

shallow ideas because you are not completely convinced. You may follow them with faith for some time, but one day you will be disappointed, because you have not accepted them through your understanding and experience. And as soon as another more impressive teacher comes along, you will abandon the first one. Examine the advice given by the Buddha. Think how reasonable, rational and scientific his way to teaching is. “Do not listen to others with blind faith. Listen to them by all means, but be mindful and listen with an open mind. You should not surrender your education and intelligence to others when you listen to them. They may try to arouse your emotion and influence your mind according to your worldly needs to satisfy your desires. But their aims may not necessarily be to reveal the truth.”

Do not accept anything on the consideration that “this is our teacher” is the final advice of the Buddha in this context. Have you ever heard of any other religious teacher who uttered such words? All the others say, “I am the only powerful teacher, I am god. Follow me, worship me, pray to me, otherwise you will have no salvation”. They also say, “You should not worship another god or another teacher”. Think for a while to understand the Buddha’s attitude. He says, “You should not depend blindly on your teacher. He may be the founder of a religion or a well-known guru, but even then you should not develop your attachment towards him at once”. This is how the Buddha has given due credit to one’s intelligence and allowed man to use his free will without depending on others. The Buddha says, “You can become your own master”. The Buddha could have told us that he is the only Enlightened Teacher and that his followers should not worship any other god or religious teacher. He does not promise his followers that they can easily go to heaven or attain Nirvana if they blindly worship him. If we practise a religion simply by depending on a teacher, we will never realise the truth. Without realising the facts about the religion that we practise we can become victims of a blind faith and arrest our freedom of thinking and later become slaves to one particular teacher and discriminate against other teachers.

We must realise that we must not depend on others for our salvation. But we can respect any religious teacher who is sincere and worthy of respect. Religious teachers can tell us what to do to gain our salvation, but one person cannot save another person. This saving is not like saving a life when it is in danger. This is final liberation from mental impurities and worldly suffering. That is why we have to work individually for gaining our emancipation or full freedom according to the advice given by the religious teachers.

“No one can save us but ourselves. Buddhas merely show the way”

Can you think of any other religious leader who would have said this? That is the freedom we have in Buddhism.

These are the ten kinds of advice given by the Buddha to the group of young people called the Kalamas who came to him seeking as to how to accept a religion and how to decide what is a true religion. His advice was: “Not to be selfish or to become slaves to others; not to do anything only for one’s own benefit but to consider all concerned”. He told them that they could understand this according to their personal experience. He also said that among various practices and beliefs, certain things are good for some but not for others. And conversely, certain things are good for others but not for the rest. Before you do anything, you have to consider both the advantages and disadvantages that will accrue to you. These are the guidelines to consider before you accept a religion. The Buddha, therefore, has given full freedom for us to choose a religion according to our own conviction.

Buddhism is a religion which teaches one to understand that man is not for religion but that religion is for man to make use of. Religion can be compared to a raft a man uses to cross a river. Once he has arrived at the other bank, he can discard it and carry on with the journey. A man should use religion for his betterment and to experience freedom, peace and happiness. Buddhism is a religion we can use to live peacefully and allow others to live peacefully as well. While practising this religion we are allowed to respect other religions. If it is difficult to respect the behaviour and attitude of others then at least we are required to be tolerant without disturbing or condemning other religions. Very few other religions teach their followers to adopt this tolerant attitude.

