

IS BUDDHISM A RELIGION?

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Since recent times, attention has been focused in the press, in magazines and from various pulpits regarding whether Buddhism is a religion, a system of doctrine, a philosophy or any other “ism”. Some of these discussions have evidently been carried on from school to the university level. On certain occasions some of these polemical wranglings are tinged with politics. Whatever be the character of these discussions it is the duty of every one to present it in its true spirit.

At the very outset it is necessary to stress that interpretations given to certain words are not applicable at all times. Hence one has got to study the term Religion taking into consideration various interpretations given to it.

The term religion at present denotes a way of living based on an organized system of belief. It has for its support certain philosophical views. It is fostered by feelings and experience.

Evidence with reference to the above is not far to seek. If we examine many religious systems such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam the above features are found in almost all of these. The only visible difference is that these features are found to a greater or lesser degree in each of them. To make this point still clear, one should examine critically those differences in Hinduism and Buddhism as well as in Christianity and Islam.

Both Hinduism and Buddhism are based on philosophical systems. But the philosophical systems of Christianity and Islam are evidently not very deep. Further, Hinduism is centered round the theory of an Individual and a Universal “Soul”. But the Buddhist philosophy is entirely different from it. Because it is built up on the fundamental theory of soullessness. Hence, when these two religions are examined with special reference to their philosophies a vast gap becomes visible. In the light of what is said above these two religions can generally be regarded as two systems of philosophy.

In spite of all this, some scholars seem to uphold that Buddhism is only a philosophy or a way of life. Most certainly the reason for such an assumption is that unlike Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are very much inspired by superstition. Although the case is such, it is not proper to assure that Buddhism is not a religion.

Not only world religions but some political systems as a matter of fact are based on philosophy. Nevertheless, the philosophy of certain political systems is abjectly feeble and deplorably gross. The philosophy of Fascism can be considered as an example. In it, is hardly discernible any philosophy worth mentioning. Whatever it is, the fundamental objective of Fascism is exploitation of man and crushing of the feeble. But Communism, which evidently is opposed to this, upholds different objectives. Its philosophy is nothing other than dialectical materialism. It is said that one should study it properly for several years even to know its general implications. But in view of the obtrude principles underlying it, Communism is never described as a philosophy. But it is generally known as a political system.

When considered in that light the deep philosophy of the theory of soullessness presents itself to indicate that Buddhism is not a religion.

No doubt many conventional features and a code of ethics found in religions of the present day world are not uncommon to Buddhism. Seeking refuge in the “Triple Gem” is the most prominent feature. Really speaking one who aspires to become a Buddhist voluntarily undertakes to seek refuge in the Buddha, His Doctrine and the Community of Disciples.

Before the community of disciples was organized as is revealed in the Mahavagga Pali, there were devotees who took refuge in the Buddha and His Doctrine. They were known as devotees who sought refuge in the two-fold formula. Henceforth when there came into being the organization of the Buddhist monks mention is made in the Mahavagga Pali of a lay-disciple who sought refuge in the three-fold formula.

It is clear from all this that not only one becomes a Buddhist for the first time by professing refuge in the “Triple Gem” but also it is borne out that there exists no other external refuge other than that. The moment a Buddhist attempts to seek some external refuge apart from the traditional way described above, he very likely forfeits his state of discipleship. This for certain is a feature common to every religion including Buddhism.

A similar reference akin to “Buddham Saranam” is found in the Bhagavad Gita, a text generally presumed to have been written nearly two centuries after the Buddha. It relates how “Dhanajaya” should take refuge in wisdom.

A famous anthropologist Dr Bhagavandas once when engaged in a discussion at Benares on the above queried a Buddhist as to the Buddha has elicited much honour from the adherents of Hinduism. As it was with Hindus, so it became necessary for the Buddhist also to evolve a code of moral precepts as its basis.

According to the Samannaphala Sutta of Digha Nikaya, it is evident that when Buddhism was in the process of being organized a degree of prominence was accorded to morality by the Blessed One. An elaborate exposition of Sila in its various aspects is found in texts such as Visuddhimagga.

In each of these texts emphasis is laid on the peculiarity of the Buddhist way of life. Where there is no such emphasis is nothing that could be called Buddhist. Hence when Buddhism was getting organized a certain system as the above became imperative. Another peculiarity prominent in the code of Buddhist moral precepts is that it consists of various types of penances. Of these penances, common habits such as partaking of foods at certain specified times is quite customary. They are very keen to keep them up with such earnestness. Generally speaking these practices are not unknown in religions such as Hinduism, Christianity and Islam.

Further it becomes necessary to investigate the role played by Faith (Saddha) in Buddhism in the course of its evolution. Although the etymological meaning of Saddha is believing, it implies something more in Buddhism. It is an active thought (cetana) which inspires one to follow teachings of the Buddha with pious motive and honour. The more one becomes enlightened to this principle the greater awareness may burst forth among Buddhists. Decrease of this awareness means decline in faith. Hence faith generally is extolled in Buddhism as a faculty, a power or a wealth that acts as a means to avert an occurrence.

Although some scholars are prone to denote faith as devotion there exists a considerable difference between the two. Devotion is reliance based on belief. It is developed at first through devotion reposed in Gods. Devotion in Buddhism signified a similar notion. That is when the Gods were superseded by the Buddha in importance. As a matter of fact, the Buddha is known as God of Gods.

Devotion in Hinduism is a mode of behaviour. As time went on when Buddhists entered into a competition with Hinduism in the matter of religion. In this connection especially the Mahayana Buddhists could do nothing but develop a cult of devotion as a means to defeat their rivals. In the course of this movement, Buddhists too had to adopt a form of worship (Upasana) evidently in compliance with the Hindu way of devotion.

One can understand this in the light of these popular Buddhist worships and rituals such as chanting of Pirit, etc.

Buddhist faith similar to that of Hindu, at the time of its evolution had given much precedence to the ideal of a Bodhisattva. In that connection worship, offering and aspiration were given an important place. Mahayanists no doubt maintained that this form of religious conduct contributed to the purity of mind and body. Hence even the orthodox Buddhist could not refuse to believe in the efficacy of faith in Buddhism.

What is to be understood in this context is that, though there is not among the Buddhists a system of prayer as is with Hindus, yet the Buddhists too had evolved a similar practice known as aspiration. This is evident on occasions such as alms giving and Pirit ceremonies, worship of Stupa, the Bo-tree and Buddhist shrines.

On such occasions as the above Buddhists are in the habit of keeping a resolution to attain the state of “Nibbana” as their chief goal. Secondly, they wish the attainment of happiness among Gods and men. In the case of attainment of Nibbana they wish to do so by means of either becoming an Enlightened one, a silent Buddha or an Arahant. Mahayana Buddhists as a matter of fact wish to become Buddhas.

Through all these expedients, elevation of status is sought. It is a Solace or an advantage for them. The peculiarity is that they expect to attain all their ideals through religion. Therefore, it is not surprising, when Buddhists organize their religion in such a way as to help fulfil their ambition. Adherents of almost every religion seek to find some security against their life, through the respective religions they professed to follow. With this idea in view, they sought some modus operandi, be it a blessing invoked through truth internal or a certain external force. They did not hesitate to adopt any possible means to create a suitable living condition, bereft of any trouble.

The chanting of Pirit was adopted by Buddhists for this purpose. It is based on the Hindu custom of invoking blessing with the formula known as “Swasti”. Indeed it is a form of protection, induced through refuge in the three word formula. Of the many Suttas utilised for this purpose Mangala Sutta ends with the saying “**Sabbatha Sotthing Gachchanti Tam Tesam Mamgatamuttamanit**”. The refrain of the Ratana Sutta is “**Etena Saccena Suvathi Hotu**”.

The duty of chanting Pirit was entrusted to Buddhist monks or perhaps to nuns. As time went on they also had to organise themselves as those Brahmins in the matter of invocation of blessings on their adherents. In other words just as Brahmins were the bestowers of prosperity on their followers when Hinduism was getting organised, so it was with Buddhist monks in the matter of

invocation of blessings on them. The custom of invoking happiness both among Hindus and Buddhists became an established institute with elaborate rituals.

In this context it is useful to examine various requirements indispensable for a Pirit ceremony, the erecting of a pavilion, the decoration of it, strewing of flowers, providing light, ringing and beating of drums are only few of them. Pirit chanting can be done without any of these. There are occasions when this ceremony is conducted like that.

There is a reference in the Dhammapadattha Katha when the Buddha also took part in a Pirit ceremony which lasted for one week. In that connection no mention of other accessories is made but the erection of a pavilion. It testifies conditions that existed clearly during Buddha's time. Pirit was chanted without much ceremony. Through the passage of time it was organised on a grand scale with a ceremonial outlook. Moreover it became a regular custom in Buddhism.

Occasions of alms giving also displayed in a festive outlook when Buddhism was getting organised. Hence a procession accompanied by singing and music became an integral feature. Moreover an occasion of a funeral of a Buddhist did not fail to colour it with singing and music. It presented itself to be a beautiful sight to look at and enjoy. The secret of this indeed is two-fold. Firstly, this certainly was a device to propagate Buddhism. Secondly, the funeral ritual became popular with Buddhism.

As it was in the days gone by, so it is today adherents of Buddhism try to propagate it thinking that propagation itself is a desirable way for its endurance. When a religion turns itself to be less appealing its adherents too become meagre. Hence for matters of preservation and propagation devotees adopt various devices according to their understanding. Thus through the passage of time, such adaptations became controversial points. Therefore Buddhism is not an exception to this rule.

Many a Buddhist desired to become popular through Buddhism. As a result of it, numerous rituals received much recognition. Those who aimed at popularity through Buddhism did not much concern moral upliftment, but with vain glory and attractiveness. They were indeed concerned more with number and less with quality.

Viewed from the theory of soullessness this concept turns out to be a mere bewilderment. This has got to be understood through the analysis of perception, experience and mode of activities motivated by the age-old theory based on individual and universal soul. Man having assumed himself as a soul conceives

that there is a life force within him. Commenting on it, Hindu philosophers produce a huge literature. These contributions are designated as Veda, Upanishad, Arannyaka and Brahmana. All these texts describe the soul and how does the feeling of self-centredness arise.

The Buddhist theory of soullessness is diametrically opposed to this. According to it the notion of self is mere ignorance. In other words it is a feeling of delusion. Self-centredness again is another notion that supports ignorance. Hence the man who tries to protect the “I” and “I-ness” adopts various devices for the purpose.

His religious system is also based on the doctrine of soullessness. Mahayanists explain it as a doctrine of void. But this is not easily understood with any degree of success. The reason for this failure is that they cling to the belief in soul. They also follow methods which encourage the belief in an everlasting entity. It is they who get much bewildered when they hear that Buddhism is not a religion. The reason for it is not very far to seek. Not only they do not know Buddhist Philosophy but also they are ignorant of the foundations on which the structure of Philosophy is built.

Of the many who express these views, among them there are many reputed scholars. Sometimes, they affirm that Buddhism is only a system of doctrine and not a philosophy. Perhaps, they may have drawn this conclusion out of indignation, towards those who advocate that Buddhism is only a philosophy and not a religion. However much there may be these differences of opinion **Buddhism is a religion and it is based on deep philosophy.**

In this context there arises a formidable issue as to why Buddhism is not organised in accordance with its fundamental theory of soullessness. According to what I believe, there are two reasons. The first is that Buddha is looked upon as a god of gods. Secondly it is due to feeling produced through fear for the preservation of Atman.

Theravadins as well as Mahayanists joined with each other to represent Buddha as one who has surpassed human form with descriptions embodying epithets such as Brahmatibrahma, Devitideva, Maratimara, Sakratisakra, etc. This fact is made clear from the teachings, both the sects have adopted.

This situation arose from the time when people were instructed to seek refuge in the three-word formula discarding all other refuges. It became rather difficult to discourage the misconception. On the other hand if the leader of a religion in the world is supreme it becomes a strong predilection with its adherents to emulate their leader. For this purpose they too must express their own views.

In this connection they are to compete with those who believe in individual and universal soul to those who believe in various types of gods. Hence they are to represent the Buddha in the garb of a lustrous god.

As a result of deviation spotlighted above they were regarded as followers of gods. Or they were looked upon as a different sect subscribing to the belief in Soul. Curiously enough with their customs, manners and ethical behaviour, they were described as a sect who professed a doctrine opposed to the theory of soullessness.

Fear in man is another reason for this. When the history of religions is examined this fact becomes still clearer.

Through fear man begins to think various things. He clings himself onto many beliefs. He begins to feel his existence. When the case is such it is no wonder that man thinks of a religion for self-security. Hence, he pins faith in various invocations for matters of self-preservation. He sees a certain form of guarantee for life in those blessing bringing utterances.

All religions in the world including Buddhism are organised for the purpose of securing a guarantee against ills of life. Hence it necessitated a certain form of bond. Buddhism as other religions adopted such a device. As a result of this new outlook the theory of Soullessness became isolated. But for certain the spirit of real Buddhism is to be found embedded in it, and not elsewhere.