

RELIGIOUS HUMANISM

By Ven. Punnaji

The Buddha is the only teacher who freed man from the bondage of subservience to any capricious, supernatural being without losing sight of the moral and ethical base of His Teaching. He taught that one's final salvation can only be worked out by the individual himself. In so doing the Buddha gave man the dignity of being responsible and answerable to himself. But this does not mean that Buddhists are entirely atheistic. This article discusses the manner in which Buddhists perceive their relationships with beings in other planes of existence.

Ed.

Some of us in the West when we hear the word “humanism”, we think of secular humanism. We tend to oppose humanism to religion, on the assumption that religion is always theistic and that humanism can never be religious. This assumption, however, is not quite correct. It is true that most Western religions are theistic: either monotheistic, polytheistic or pantheistic. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are said to be monotheistic. This does not mean that the essence of religion is the worship of gods or a God. As the well known psychoanalyst, Dr. Erich Fromm, points out in his very enlightening book, “Psychoanalysis and Religion” (Yale University Press 1974, p.21),

“While we know that there were and are many religions outside of monotheism, we nevertheless associate the concept religion with a system centered around God and supernatural forces; we tend to consider monotheistic religion as a frame of reference for the understanding and evaluation of all other religions. It thus becomes doubtful whether religions without God like Buddhism, Taoism, or Confucianism can be properly called religions.”

To the Easterner, religion is the living of the good life, the higher life, or the “divine” life (brahmachariya). This is to abide by good principles of living based on the appreciation of the higher values of life. Religion is the conscious development of the noble or sublime nature of human beings. Divinity is this sublime nature not supernatural power. Even a supernatural being if lacking in noble qualities is not called god but devil. Therefore even those who worship gods are worshipping goodness, not power or creatorship. It is possible to speak of religion in a humanistic way. Religion could be seen as the development of

the goodness within man. Religion is man's effort to become "divine", to become perfect.

Theistic religion is only one variety of religion. All religions are not theistic. Eastern religions represented by Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism are humanistic. Western scholars have branded Hinduism as a kind of polytheism by mistake. It is true that people in the East do pray to gods for help. But this practice is not seen in the East as religious practice. Such practice is rather regarded as more akin to magic than religion. An English professor, Richard Gombrich of Oxford University who visited Sri Lanka was astonished to hear that Buddhists did not think that seeking help in gods was religion. He says in his book, "Theravada Buddhism" (Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.23 and 24)

"I reported that a monk told me, "Gods have nothing to do with religion." For Buddhists, gods are powerful beings who can grant worldly favours, much like powerful people.... Buddhists deny the existence of a creator god, or any omnipotent or omniscient deity, or any being in the world who is not subject to decay and death. (yes, even the gods die in the end.)

For Buddhists, religion is purely a matter of understanding and practice which constitute progress towards *salvation*...

Being told that the gods have nothing to do with religion made me aware that the adherents of different religions draw the line between what is religion and what is not at very different places. Buddhists who *worshipped* gods were not thereby being inconsistent, unorthodox or syncretistic."

(emphasis mine)

While applauding, appreciating and respecting the very shrewd observation, the astute scholarship and logical acumen of Dr.Gombrich, I consider it necessary to comment here that the word "worship" in reference to gods is not exactly appropriate to describe the Buddhist position. The word derived from the two parts, "worth + ship" means, to recognize the worth of some thing or person. Worship is the expression of one's sense of values, at least from a Buddhist point of view. A person may worship power, money, wisdom or virtue, according to what he values and holds in high esteem.

When a Buddhist seeks help from a "deva" (angel), he does not think of the worth of these "devas". In fact, it is even incorrect to use the term "god" to translate the Buddhist word "deva" though it is commonly done. The closest translation would be "angel", even then, Buddhists do not consider "devas" to be supernatural beings with supernatural powers. They are just beings in a

higher plane of existence than that of humans, who could sometimes help humans within limits. Their powers though superior to that of ordinary humans, are still limited. Devas cannot override 'kamma'. They are subject to 'kamma' themselves. These "devas" were human beings before they were born in that state and we too can become like them after death if we lead good lives (i.e. perform good kamma). Buddhists believe that "devas" bow down and worship human beings who are virtuous. This is why Buddhists believe devas worship the Buddha and that the Buddha is superior to all devas not only in virtue and wisdom but also in power (psychic power). Buddhists believe that it is possible for a human being to reach such levels. This is the special characteristic of humanistic religion that does not subordinate the status of human beings to that of gods. Devas are not worshipped by Buddhists but sometime sought after for help, just as one would seek the help of a lawyer, doctor, mechanic, or anyone with special skills that one does not possess.

What Buddhists consider to be worthy of worship is "goodness" and "wisdom", which are inseparable and complementary. These are the Buddhist values that they worship. Buddhists do not worship power or omnipotence. A powerful person is not necessarily good or wise. He might seek help in a powerful person to satisfy his desires, in his weakness. This does not mean that he thinks that this person is great because of his power. A Buddhist worships the Buddha, his teaching, and his disciples, because they are "good" and "wise". The Buddha is said to have attained to goodness and penetrated the world (*sugato lokavidu*). The Buddha, his Teaching and his Following are called the "Triple Gem" and are worshipped as the Holy Trinity by Buddhists; "Gem" symbolizes value. They are also his only refuge because he believes that only goodness and wisdom can truly help him, not power. Power can only satisfy desires temporarily. He knows that power is not the ultimate solution to his problems.

A comment about the word salvation too seems appropriate. Strictly speaking, Buddhism is not a search for salvation because Buddhists do not believe in a "soul" that needs to be saved. Buddhism, on the other hand, is a search for the solution to a problem. Therefore, Buddhism is pragmatic rather than soteriological. Of course, one might in a loose sense apply the term "salvation" in reference to the Buddhist concept of "relief" (*vimutti*), but strictly speaking, it is not correct. It is "relief" from a painful experience (*dukkha*) that Buddhists seek, not the saving of a soul. It is really the relief from the painful experience of a "self" or "soul" which is also a delusion. In other words, it is the relief from a mental sickness or an insanity. This is why the Buddha was called "The unsurpassable physician and surgeon". In modern terms we might call him "The super psychiatrist."

Buddhism, in this sense, is a radical psychotherapy rather than a religion that worships power or prays for temporary solace or satisfaction. It is a psychotherapeutic religion rather than a soteriology. What Buddhism discourages is not so much the supplication to superior powers, but the worship of such powers. This is why Buddhists still seek help from “devas” (angels), but worship only the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha. These two modes of practice are analogous to the palliative treatment of a disease and its radical cure. These two approaches are not mutually exclusive, and can be complementary.

Worship, in Buddhism, is not practised in order to obtain help from the Buddha through his wisdom or power. Worship is the result of understanding and appreciating the values of Buddhism. Worship is a psychological exercise that begins one on the path to the goal of perfection in goodness and wisdom which relieves one from the painful experience (dukkha). The basic assumption is that we become what we worship. We are drawn towards the thing we worship. Our life moves in the direction of what we consider to be superior. We also move in the direction of what we consider to be pleasant and away from what we consider to be painful. Buddhists believe that human problems could be solved only through the perfection of human nature and understanding. This is why he takes refuge in perfection and worship perfection. This struggle for the perfection of human nature and the belief in its possibility is what characterizes humanistic religion. Even the concept of worship seems to differ in these two types of religion, humanistic and theistic.

The central concept in Theistic thinking is the concept of “God”. Theistic religion is built around this concept of God in the form of the creator and controller of the world. Religion, according to Theism, has come down to Earth from Heaven. Its aim is to fulfil the purpose of the creator. This practice of religion is the worship of God and obedience to the commandments of this creator in order to achieve His purpose. Mankind is sinful, ignorant and powerless from this theistic standpoint. Man can never reach a state of perfection. He can only be forgiven by god for his sins and can try to be good with the help of god if God chooses to help. This religious practice is based on faith in the words of God, expressed through the words of prophets and holy scripture, which has to be believed even if contrary to human reason.

The central concept of humanistic thinking is “Man”, the human being. As mentioned earlier, not all humanistic thinking is secular; it can be religious too. Humanistic religion is built around the concept of “Man”. Religion, from this point of view, has not come down from heaven, but has grown up on earth to satisfy a human need, to solve a human problem. Man is not seen to be under the mercy of supernatural powers. Man is the controller of his own destiny,

even in his weakest moments. Through efficient action, he can bring about a desirable destiny. The practice is based on human experience and reason. Religious truth is a human discovery, not a divine revelation. This truth is not a thing to be believed but one to be verified and understood. The practice is based on that understanding.

The practice of religion from this humanistic standpoint, is not the obedience to divine commandment, but a conscious struggle of man for perfection, a process of growth and evolution of the human consciousness. The basic assumption is that a human being is capable of reaching that state of perfection through his own unaided effort, without the intervention of any supernatural powers.

It is the failure to understand this distinction between theistic and humanistic religion that there has been so much misunderstanding between Eastern and Western thinkers. A correct understanding of this distinction could easily bridge the communication gap between East and West.

Humanistic thinking is not confined to the East, nor is theistic thinking confined to the West. The modern scientific tradition is western humanism, while there is much primitive religious practice in the East that is theistic. In fact, humanism dominates the thinking of modern man in most progressive cultures. Actually, modern man seems to be living in two compartments. In every day secular life, in business and scientific thinking he is rational and humanistic. When, however, he becomes religiously inclined he tends to become theistic in his thinking.

Modern man also seems to be at crossroads, disillusioned by scientific humanism on the one hand and religious dogmatism on the other. While he appreciates what is good in both extremes, he rejects what is bad. He is in search of rational religion upholding the religious values of goodness, purity and truth. In other words, he is looking for a humanistic religion. This is why we find many Westerners seeking and trying out Eastern ways of thought and practice which are based on humanistic religion.

Fritjof Capra says in his famous book, "The Tao Of Physics" (Shambhala 1975, p.25),

"Eastern thought and more generally, mystical thought provide a consistent and relevant philosophical background to the theories of contemporary science; a conception of the world in which man's scientific discoveries can be in perfect harmony with his spiritual aims and religious beliefs. ...there is an essential harmony between the spirit of Eastern Wisdom and Western science."

It is clear that the modern world is in need of Eastern humanistic religion. Buddhism is a humanistic religion that has evolved to a high level of maturity.

It is a human discovery based on a very scientific procedure leading to the ultimate level of perfection of human consciousness. Buddhism can make a great contribution to the modern world in guiding its search for the meaning of life.

To quote Dr. Erich Fromm again (ibid. p.38)'

“One of the best examples of humanistic religions is early Buddhism.... The concept of Nirvana as the state of mind the fully awakened one can achieve is not one of man's helplessness and submission but on the contrary one of the development of the highest powers man possesses.”

Again Dr.Fromm says (ibid. p.113),

“The problem of religion is not the problem of God but the problem of man...Centering the religious discussion on the acceptance or denial of the symbol God blocks the understanding of the religious problem as a human problem and prevents the development of that human attitude which can be called religious in a humanistic sense.”

Ten Kinds of Human Duties

1. *Ministering to our own parents.*
2. *Attending to the needs and welfare of our children.*
3. *Cherishing and looking after our wives.*
4. *Maintaining mutual understanding between husband and wife.*
5. *Attending to the needs of our relatives.*
6. *Respecting the elders.*
7. *Remembering the departed ones by performing some religious services.*
8. *Inviting the devas to share with us the happiness gained through meritorious deeds.*
9. *To live in accordance with existing moral codes in our society.*
10. *To lead a righteous way of life.*

(The Buddha – Anguttara Nikara)

Extract from “Voice of Buddhism” magazine, Vol. 27 No. 1, Jun 1989, KDN No. PP134/3/89, Published by Buddhist Missionary Society, Jalan Berhala, Kuala Lumpur.

