

# THE BUDDHA, THE EIGHTFOLD PATH AND OTHER RELIGIONS

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*It has often been said, that Buddhism is not a religion. If by this is meant that Buddhists do not resort to the tactics used by some religionists, then it is true indeed, We should note how the Buddha wanted his teachings to be practised. Buddhism deploras the glorification of one' s own religion while condemning the beliefs of others. It does not allow specious debates on doctrine or dogma. It does not encourage blind faith in the efficacy of ritual prayers or even the grace of a god for salvation. It is not interested in the numerical strength of its followers. It encourages one to respect the good in other systems while it does not shy away from condemning harmful practices (like animal sacrifices). Rather, Buddhism insists on self-effort to gain emancipation. The Buddha is only a guide.*

*Buddhism recognises the validity of any religion to the extent to which it contains aspects of the noble eightfold path. This means that morality, concentration and wisdom must be practised. Lily De Silva is a Professor of Buddhist Philosophy, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.*

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The most important feature which distinguishes the Buddhist attitude to other religions is the tolerance of others' ideas. On this aspect Ven. Walpola Rahula makes the following observations in his much-translated book **What the Buddha Taught**:

‘The Spirit of tolerance and understanding has been from the beginning one of the most cherished ideals of Buddhist culture and civilization. That is why there is not a single example of persecution or the shedding of a drop of blood in converting people to Buddhism or in its propagation during the long history of 2500 years. It spread peacefully all over the continent of Asia..... Violence in any form, under any pretext whatsoever, is absolutely against the teaching of the Buddha.’

We find concrete historical evidence of this tolerant attitude translated into action in Rock Edict No. XII of Asoka, the great Buddhist Emperor of India in the third century B.C. He inscribed:

'One should not honour one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honour others' religions too. So doing, one helps one's own religion to grow and renders service to the religions of others too. In acting otherwise one depraves 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.'

Buddhism spread steadily among neighbouring nations and continues to do so even today, propelled by an inner dynamism which may be called the power of the veracity of its teaching and its commitment to non-violence. Wherever Buddhism spread, it adapted itself to suit the cultural background of the country concerned. This is not because it did not have a new message to offer or a positive contribution to make but because it had a total vision of reality. It explained to humans their situation in the world at large from the *lokiya*, *samparayika* and the *lokuttara* dimensions. The *lokiya* dimension dealt with the mundane situation in this tangible world of sense experience. The *samparayika* dimension dealt with the eschatological situation - how to make life happy in the world beyond the grave. The *lokuttara* dimension dealt with the ultimate bliss of emancipation, with a clear-cut path to its attainment.

It is possible to make this point clearer by citing the traditional episode of the blind men and the elephant. When asked to describe the elephant, each blind man expressed his own idea of what the elephant looked like from the point of his own experience. The one who felt the side said the elephant was like a wall. The one who felt the tail said it was like a broom and so forth. Now Buddhism is like the man with sight who gets a full view of the elephant. Therefore Buddhism realises that the broom-like part also has a legitimate place in the part of the whole. So Buddhism would not get into arguments with the blind man for describing the elephant as a broom but would rather find ways and means of curing the blindness, so that he too gets a full view of the elephant. This is how Buddhism has been a tolerant religion. It conceded to each philosophy the part of reality which each philosophy correctly described. But this attitude did not prevent Buddhism from asserting itself whenever a false view, which was detrimental to human well-being was upheld. As an example we can take the caste system that was prevalent in India during the time of the Buddha. Caste discrimination was an unhealthy social phenomenon that was supported by the Brahmanic philosophy. It denied human rights to a section of society, while giving undue privileges to

another section. In the name of tolerance Buddhism did not abstain from criticising this unhealthy social institution. Buddhism put forward various arguments against discrimination on grounds of caste and maintained the position that one's superiority or inferiority depended not on birth but on ethical grounds, on the quality of one's own actions.

Another example can be cited of the Buddhist attitude to the efficacy of water for spiritual cleansing. As this was not only a useless notion but also a dangerous one, Buddhism derided the idea by saying that, if it were true, all the aquatic creatures would ascend to heaven before all others, as they constantly live in water and had a better chance of getting their sins washed off. Thus though tolerant, Buddhism was not afraid to call a spade a spade whenever the occasion demanded.

Buddhism is a non-dogmatic religion; it discouraged and even shunned debates. There are several suttas in the Suttanipata which clearly illustrate the Buddhist repugnance to debates. This standpoint is supported by several reasons. Buddhism delegated only limited validity to reason, as it was no sufficient criterion of truth. Logical probability and psychological truths are of a different order.

Experiential truths propounded by Buddhism go far beyond the bounds of reason. No account of rational arguments can prove even the taste of a mango; how much more the spiritual experience of an honest truth seeking meditator. Moreover Buddhism realised that argumentation is a double-edged sword; it works to the spiritual disadvantage of both the winner and the loser. The winner earns hatred and jealousy from the other and the loser lies depressed. Therefore it is to be shunned on moral grounds. Philosophical debates during the time of the Buddha had an unhealthy psychological attitude. They were very arrogant about their oratorical skills and Saccaka can be cited as a glaring example. He boasted that there was no philosopher or religious teacher who would not tremble and sweat with fear when confronted by him for debate. He said he could harass an opponent as a strong man would pull a goat to and fro, catching hold of him by his long beard. When challenged by him, even an inanimate pillar would display tremors; how much more would a sentient human being! Such was Saccaka's arrogant boast. Buddhism deprecates this attitude and maintains that, by being attached to one's own point of view and by looking down upon the views of others, one creates a great fetter for oneself.

There were also debators during the time of the Buddha, known as *vitan davadins*, who did not have a point of view of their own to put forward

but merely indulged in erratic for the sake of securing victory in debates. Pali texts describe them wandering about, shattering the views of others with hairsplitting arguments. They were notorious for praising themselves and condemning others. The Buddha deprecated these attitudes as they were not only useless but positively harmful for spiritual advancement and acquisition of knowledge. But on the other hand there were a set of educated people, whom the Pali texts described as *vinnu* or the *intelligentsia*, who were honest truth seekers. They came to the Buddha with an open mind and the Buddha really appreciated their healthy attitude and the spirit of inquiry. Though the Buddha and his disciples looked down upon debates, they always encouraged the spiritual quest and fact finding philosophical discussions. They sometimes went out of their way to meet other religious sects and the suttas recorded valuable dhamma discussions which took place on such occasions.

The Buddhist attitude towards the dhamma also was such that it discouraged involvement in philosophical debates. The Buddha regarded the dhamma as a means to an end. He compares the dhamma to a raft with which to ferry across the flood of samsara. After crossing over, it is foolish to carry the raft on one's shoulder. Though intrinsically true, the instrumental value of the dhamma is emphasised to discourage brandishing it as a philosophy for defence and offense in debate which was a popular social institution of the day. The Buddha was more interested in getting his disciples to practise and live according to the dhamma to gain experience of spiritual truths, which he himself realised, than getting them involved in philosophical debates. The Buddha emphasised that the human predicament in the world is such that one has to act quickly, as if one's head was on fire. There is no time to waste on philosophical debates; one has to energetically engage oneself in the task of liberating oneself from worldly misery. This was the pragmatic attitude towards the dhamma and it no doubt colours the Buddhist attitude towards other religions as well. Jayatilleke observes that evidence of the text indicates that the Buddha refrained from joining issue with other religionists in debate as far as possible, though he seems to have accepted the challenge, when they came to him with questions for the purpose of debate. He generally preferred to expound his own doctrine rather than get involved in criticising the doctrine of others. Once two brahmins came to the Buddha and stated that Purana Kassapa and Nigantha Nataputta expressed contradictory views about the extent of the universe and inquired from the Buddha which of them was correct. Buddha replied, "Let that be aside, I will teach you the dhamma". Similar was his reply to Subhaddha, who came to him when he was on his death-bed with the question whether all the famous religious teachers of the day

understood the truth or none understood, or only some of them understood.

The *Udumbarikasihanadasutta* specifically states the Buddha's altruistic motive in preaching the doctrine. The Buddha says he does not preach the dhamma with the desire to augment his following; people may continue to follow any teacher of their choice. Nor does the Buddha preach with a desire to prevent the hearers from following the rules of their own religious institutions. It is immaterial for the Buddha whether they continue to observe rules of their own institutions. Further, the Buddha does not wish to make the hearers secede from their chosen modes of livelihood. They may continue their own life styles. Neither does the Buddha desire to confirm them in activities which their teachers deem are harmful. The Buddha does not also wish to dissuade them from activities which their teachers hold to be beneficial. They may continue to hold as harmful or beneficial any activity according to the instructions of their own teachers.

The Buddha preaches to the people because, as a matter of fact, there are unwholesome activities, which, if not abandoned, bring grave suffering not only in this life but in the unforeseen future as well. It is for the sake of abandoning these unskillful, unwholesome activities that the Buddha preaches the doctrine, so that those who follow the instructions will grow in moral purity and attain realisation and lasting happiness.

Thus it is plainly pointed out the Buddha has no ulterior motive of gaining a large following in preaching the dhamma, nor the idea of depriving other religious teachers of a large membership. The listeners may affiliate themselves with any religious teacher of their wish. But if they put away the unwholesome activities that the Buddha points out as having grave harmful consequences, they themselves will be the fortunate beneficiaries of insightful wisdom and lasting happiness. To further illustrate the authentic attitude of the Buddha towards other religions, the episode of the conversion of Upali can be cited. He was a well known man with a good reputation in society during the Buddha's day. He was a follower of Jainism, which was another religious sect founded by a senior contemporary of the Buddha, Jina Mahavira. Upali was persuaded by Mahavira to hold a debate with the Buddha on the theory of kamma. Upali visited the Buddha and had a discussion. He was convinced that the Buddha's point of view was sound and he confessed faith in the Buddha as a new convert. At this point the Buddha cautioned him, saying that when a person of recognised social standing as Upali was, takes a decision of this importance to change from one religion to another, he

must do so after very careful consideration. Upali was surprised and more pleased by this comment of the Buddha. He explained that if any other religious sect found a new convert in him, they would have hoisted flags and broadcast the fact by beating drums throughout the city. The Buddha, on the contrary had asked him to consider his decision carefully. Upali reconfirmed his conviction. The Buddha then advised Upali not to withdraw patronage extended to the Jains. Such was the tolerant sympathetic attitude Buddhism adopted towards other religions.

The Buddhist attitude towards other religions is further coloured by its pragmatic considerations. What motivated the Buddha to preach the doctrine was his sympathy toward humankind. His only concern was to show humankind the means to get rid of suffering. Therefore speculations such as the origin of the world, its extent and duration are of no value to him. He boldly left such speculations aside unanswered despite great philosophical interest displayed in such questions at the time. Buddha defined the scope of philosophy within the Four Noble Truths –

1. The truth of the unsatisfactory nature of human existence,
2. The truth of the cause of this unsatisfactory condition,
3. The truth of the cessation of this unsatisfactory condition and
4. The truth of the path leading to the cessation of this unsatisfactory condition.

The Buddha refused to make any pronouncement beyond the limits of these four truths. He had a specific purpose in life and he strictly confined himself to this purpose. He did not transgress the limits of his defined purpose merely to cater to the intellectual curiosity of people. He admitted that he did not preach all that he discovered in his quest for spiritual emancipation. What he preached to humankind was equivalent to a handful of leaves, whereas what he understood but refrained from preaching was similar to the leaves in the forest. Therefore he deliberately avoided getting involved in philosophical arguments which were irrelevant to his spiritual mission. He preached only what was true and useful and he preferred to ignore what did not serve a useful purpose.

The Buddha advocated that one has to seek out one's emancipation by personal effort, the Buddhas are only guides; they can only point out the path and each person has to tread that path to make an end of suffering. The Buddhas are no saviours. During the time of the Buddha there were Brahmins who invoked and prayed to various gods such as Indra, Soma and Varuna for salvation. The Buddha pointed out the futility of such prayer with an appropriate simile. It is like a man wishing to cross over a

river, stands on one bank and prays that the other bank should come over to him. However much he prays, invokes and wishes, the other bank of the river would never come to him. What he should do is to strive hard and cross over himself with the strength of his own hands and feet. Similarly, if you wish to be reborn in the companionship of Brahmas, you have to cultivate the spiritual qualities that are found among Brahmas and not just pray to the Brahmas. Thus Buddhism expresses a definite attitude towards the futility of the assertion some religions make on the efficacy of prayers and the grace of God, or gods for man's liberation.

The famous *Kalamasutta* clearly explains the correct attitude an intelligent person should adopt towards any religion. No religious proposition should be accepted as true merely on grounds of faith, reason, reputation of teacher or on subjective bias. They should be tested against experience. A Mahayana sutta goes on to admonish that they should be subjected to the most rigorous test as one would test gold by cutting, rubbing and burning. It is only when one is convinced that the course of action propounded by a religion leads to one's happiness that one should accept it as one's philosophy of life. In the *Vimamsakasutta* the Buddha invites his disciples to examine even the conduct of the Buddha himself. The Buddha claims to be free from all greed, hatred and delusion: disciples should not take this at face value, they should be vigilant about the Buddha's conduct and see for themselves whether the Buddha's physical and verbal behaviour betrays the presence of negative emotions and ignorance. If on investigation they find no trace of negative emotions and ignorance, then they should come to the conclusion that the Buddha is morally and intellectually perfect, and not on mere faith. Thus Buddhism advocates the critical assessment by truth-seekers, not only of other religions but even of itself and its founder.

The teachings of the Buddha are open to one and all. No one is debarred from learning the dhamma on grounds of caste, sex or nationality. This fact is important when we consider the social background of the Buddha's day. Vedas were considered to contain the divinely inspired sacred truths and they were not to be chanted in the earshot of sudras, the untouchable outcastes. The *Manusmṛti*, a later Brahmanic text, asserts that he who explains the sacred law to the sudra or dictates to him a penance will sink together with that man into hell called *asamvṛta*. But Buddhism stipulated no such discrimination. Nor did the Buddha teach any esoteric doctrine to be imparted only to a chosen few. Similarly he did not limit the freedom of his disciples by prohibiting them to study the doctrines of other religions. A Buddhist is free to study any religion or discipline. It does not matter from which source one learns what is true and useful.

To illustrate the point the episode of Pukkusati can be cited. He was a young mendicant and once he spent the night in a potter's shed. The Buddha too happened to go there to spend the night and the two did not know each other. The Buddha was impressed by the calm demeanour of the mendicant. The Buddha asked him who his teacher was and whose doctrine he followed. Pukkusati replied that he was a follower of the Buddha and that he appreciated the doctrine of the Buddha. The Buddha asked him whether he had seen the Buddha and whether he could recognise him, were he to see him. He replied that he had never seen the Buddha and that he could not recognize him. Without disclosing his own identity the Buddha preached the doctrine and the young mendicant was greatly benefited. It is said that he attained the penultimate stage of sainthood.

This episode clearly shows that it is immaterial from whom one learns the truth, for Pukkusati did not know that the Buddha himself was speaking to him. If the teaching is true and if one follows it meticulously in one's physical, verbal and mental behaviour, results will follow automatically, irrespective of the source from where the idea came.

In a number of passages in the Pali Canon the Noble Eight-fold Path is declared as the one and only path to emancipation. The *Maggasamyutta* maintains that it is only a fully enlightened Buddha who can discover the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the pure, unblemished path to emancipation.

The Dhammapada maintains that the Noble Eightfold Path is the noblest of all paths and that it is the only path to knowledge and purity. In the *Mahaparinibbanasutta* the Buddha tells Subhadda that there are no saints or perfected beings outside the Noble Eightfold Path. The Dhammapada states that there are no Saints outside just as there are no footprints in the air.

These statements give us a clue to the Buddhist attitude to other religions. Any religion is true and efficacious to the extent to which it contains aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path. In whatever religion the Eightfold Path, comprising the cultivation of moral habits (*sila*), mental discipline (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*), is found, in that religion there would be saints and perfected beings.

Still other suttas look at the question of the possibility of liberation through other religious systems from another point of view. The *Nagaravindeyyasutta* maintains that recluses who have eliminated greed,



hatred and delusion and those who have embarked on a course of action to put an end to these negative traits, deserve to be honoured. The *Chachakkasutta* upholds that it is impossible to make an end of suffering without eliminating the greed for pleasant sensations, the aversion regarding unpleasant sensations and the ignorance regarding neutral sensations. We are kept bound to samsaric life because we yearn for pleasure. Pleasure is nothing but pleasurable sensation. If we are to make an end of suffering, i.e. transcend samsaric life, we have to understand the nature of sensations in all their aspects. Sensations arise and pass away, changeability and dynamism are their very nature. They have to be mastered by contemplating them, by mindfully observing them and this method is known in Pali as *vedananupassana*. When one practises this method one understands that greed underlies all pleasurable sensations, because when we experience pleasurable sensations we long for more of them. On the other hand, hatred or aversion underlies unpleasant painful sensations, because when we experience painful sensations we rebel against them and we want to get rid of them. As for neutral sensations, we are generally unaware of them. So whatever the sensation, we are caught up with greed, hatred and delusion, which have to be eliminated to make an end of suffering. Therefore Buddhism maintains that for a religion to be an effective means of liberation, it has to teach a method of getting rid of greed, hatred and delusion (*lobha/raga, dosa and moha*).

The *Nivapasutta* enumerates three types of religious people who have not gone beyond the clutches of Mara, the evil one. The first type comprises those who indulge in the sense pleasures without any restraint. The second type comprises those who go to the other extreme of self-mortification. Without being able to sustain life by such mortification, they too become the prey of Mara. The third type is careful enough to partake of sensual pleasures with due restraint but are given to philosophical speculations. They become involved in futile speculative exercises regarding the duration and the extent of the universe, the nature of the soul and the mode of existence of the liberated one after death. Thereby they cannot go beyond the snare of the evil one.

This classification gives us a fair idea of the Buddhist estimation of the practices of other religions. Buddhism belongs to the fourth type listed in the sutta and its characteristics are the moderate enjoyment of sensual pleasures with due care and restraint for maintaining the body in sound health, non-indulgence in metaphysical speculations and the cultivation of mental purity and understanding. The usual upper conscious meditative states from one to eight and the destruction of mental

defilements are defined as states which are beyond the vision of Mara and his attendant host.

What is important for our purpose here is that Buddhism maintains that it is not possible to attain final liberation from suffering without a profound understanding of these phenomena from all aspects of experience. It is not evident that any religious sect outside the pale of Buddhism has explained these phenomena so lucidly or even focused attention on them. The *Maggasamyutta* observes that among humans, only a few cross over; the majority run about along the coast.

According to a sutta in the *Anguttaranikaya* the Buddha was once asked whether he hoped to save one third or one half of the whole of humanity by the path he discovered. Nowhere has the Buddha made such a claim. But, it is explained, that just as a door-keeper, guarding the one and only door to a palace, knows that all who enter this palace should enter through this door, so the Buddha knows that all who were liberated in the past, who are being liberated now and who will be liberated in the future have to pass through this door and no other. The path mentioned in this sutta emphasises the eradication of the five hindrances, the practice of the four stations of mindfulness and the cultivation of the seven factors of enlightenment. The *Saccasamyutta* maintains that all Buddhas of the past, present and future realise the Four Noble Truths. It is said that it is impossible to make an end of suffering without realising these Four Noble Truths, just as it is impossible to fetch water in a vessel made of Khadira leaves.

In the *Sandakasutta* Ananda enumerates four pseudo-religions and four unsatisfactory religions. The four pseudo-religions are (a) materialism, which maintains that death is the end of life and that both the foolish and the wise are annihilated at death (b) religions which deny moral validity, (c) religions which deny moral causation and human enterprise and (d) religions which deny even the value of life and uphold a theory of deterministic evolutionism. It is observed that no intelligent person would consider becoming a disciple under such religious teachers as, if their tenets are true, no useful purpose will be served either by following or not following those religions.

The unsatisfactory religions are (a) those where the teacher claims omniscience with ever-present continuous knowledge, (b) those which are based on revelation, (c) those which depend on mere logic and reasoning and (d) those which resort to skepticism. An intelligent man would not choose any one of these religions for a number of reasons. On

investigation he would find that the teacher does not show evidence of having omniscience as he claims. Revelation is not an adequate criterion of truth. Experiential truths cannot be verified by mere logic and reasoning. The skeptics have no positive contribution to make to knowledge.

Having made all these observations from original suttas of the Pali Canon, it is interesting to quote a statement made by the Buddha in the *Suttanipata*. 'I do not say that all recluses and brahmanas are involved in decay and death'. Here the Buddha seems to accept the possibility of emancipated beings among other religious sages. We are reminded that Buddhism also recognizes a class of emancipated beings with a very high degree of enlightenment called Pacceka Buddhas. They do not obtain enlightenment having heard the doctrine from a Buddha or an Arahant. They are self-enlightened and they have to be reckoned as sages outside the dispensation of a Buddha. Tradition maintains that Pacceka Buddhas do not arise in the world at a time when the doctrine of a Buddha is known. Pacceka Buddhas are incapable of preaching the doctrine so as to lead a person to emancipation, most likely because the path by which they attained enlightenment is not systematically understood by them. The *Sotapattisamyutta* states that those who have no conviction in the Buddha, dhamma and sangha but who are endowed with the spiritual faculties of faith/self-confidence (*saddha*), energy (*viriya*), mindfulness (*sati*), concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*), are not born in states of woe (*duggati*).

Let me conclude this essay by summarizing that Buddhism does not completely rule out the possibility of the presence of emancipated beings in other religious traditions. But it asserts that it is impossible to attain liberation without the cultivation of moral habits (*sila*), mental culture or concentration (*samadhi*) and wisdom (*panna*). Any religion is true to the extent it incorporates aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path and any religion is false to the extent it deviates from this path. Buddhism adopts the attitude of tolerance towards other religious ideologies and appreciates and evaluates them according to their respective truth values. It avoids debate and argumentation but encourages dialogue and open-minded inquiry.