

THE RATIONALITY OF BUDDHISM

By Rev. U Thittila, Agga Maha Pandita, Burma

The writer of this article is a well-known Buddhist scholar who has written numerous articles on Buddhism over a long span of time, and has the unique distinction of being the only Buddhist monk who was resident in Europe during the Second World War.

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Buddhism is not a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, for it is not a system of faith and worship. In Buddhism there is no such thing as belief in a body of dogmas which have to be taken on faith, such as belief in a supreme God, a creator of the universe, certain doctrines concerning an immortal soul, a personal saviour and prophets and a hierarchy of spiritual beings such as angels and archangels who are supposed to carry out the will of a supreme deity. It is true that there are different types of Devas or spiritual beings mentioned in Buddhism but they are beings like ourselves, subject to the same natural law of cause and effect. They are not immortal: They do not control the destiny of mankind. The Buddha does not ask us to accept belief in any supernatural agency or anything that cannot be tested by experience.

Buddhism begins as a search for truth. It does not begin with unfounded assumptions concerning any God or First Cause, and it does not claim to present the whole truth of the absolute beginning and end of mankind's spiritual pilgrimage in the form of a divine revelation. The Buddha himself searched and discovered with direct insight the nature of the cosmos, the causes of its arising and of its passing away, and the real cause of suffering and a way in which it could be brought to an end for the sake of all living beings. Having done so he proclaimed the principles on which he had conducted his research, so that all who wished to do so could follow his system and know the final truth themselves.

It was for this reason that the Buddha was able to make a statement that was entirely different from that of all other religious leaders of his time who said, "you must have absolute faith in me and in what I tell you", whereas the Buddha said "It is natural that doubt should arise in the mind. I tell you not to believe anything merely because it has been handed down by tradition, or because it has been said by some great personage in the past, or because it is

commonly believed, or because others have told it to you, or even because I myself have said it. But whatever you are asked to believe, ask yourself whether it is true in the light of your experience, whether it is in conformity with reason and good principles and whether it is conducive to the highest good and welfare of all beings, and only if it passes this test should you accept it and act in accordance with it” (Kalama Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya).

This statement made by the Buddha two thousand five hundred years ago, still retains its original force. It is a statement of the scientific principle of reasoning and also a definition of the rationality of Buddhism. The follower of the Buddha is invited to doubt, until he has examined all the evidence of the basic facts of the teachings and has himself experimented with them to see if they be true. Having proved by these means that they are true he is able to accept them. One of the qualities of the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, is that it is “Ehipassiko” – “That which invites everyone to come and see for himself.”

The Buddha taught men to rely upon themselves in order to achieve their own deliverance, and not to look to any external saviour. He never put himself forward as a mediator between us and our final deliverance. But he can tell us what to do, because he has done it himself and so knows the way; but unless we ourselves act, the Buddha cannot take us to our goal. Though we may “take refuge in the Buddha” (Buddham saranam gacchami) as the Buddhist phrase in the simple ceremony of pledging ourselves to live a righteous life, it must not be with any blind faith that he can save us. He can point out the way; he can tell us of its difficulties and of the beauties which we shall find as we tread the way; but he cannot tread it for us. We must tread the way ourselves.

“Abide with oneself as an island, with oneself as a refuge; abide with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge. Seek not for external refuge.” (Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Digha Nikaya).

No one can purify or defile another. One is directly responsible for one’s own purification or defilement. The Buddha says: -

“By oneself, indeed, is evil done; by oneself is one defiled; by oneself is evil left undone; by oneself, indeed, is one purified. Purity and impurity depend on oneself – No one purifies another.” (The Dhammapada)

Buddha Devotion

In Buddhism mere belief is dethroned and replaced by confidence (Saddha) based on knowledge of truth. Reason enables man to arrange and systematise knowledge in order to find truth while confidence gives him determination to be true to his high ideals. Confidence or faith becomes superstition when it is not accompanied by reason but reason without confidence would turn a man into a machine without feeling or enthusiasm for his ideals. Reason seeks

disinterestedly to realise truth, but confidence moulds a man's character and gives him strength of will to break all the barriers which hinder his progress in achieving his aims. While reason makes a man rejoice in truths he has already discovered, confidence gives him fresh courage and helps him onward to further conquests, to aspire to work strenuously for the realisation of what has not yet been realised. It is this Saddha which has the power to transform cold abstract rationalism into a philosophy of fervent hope, love and compassion. It is also this Saddha which is the basis of the loving devotion to the great teacher, the Buddha, his teaching and his holy order.

The object of devotion is known in Buddhism as Tisarana – the three-fold-Refuges, comprising the Buddha – The Enlightened One, Dhamma – His doctrine and Sangha – the Order of His Noble Disciples. Every Theravada Buddhist religious meeting begins with a recitation in Pali of the formula of the three Refuges: -

“Buddham Saranam gacchami –

I go to the Buddha for refuge

Dhammam Saranam gacchami –

I go to the Doctrine for refuge

Sangham saranam gacchami –

I go to the Holy Order for refuge.”

These three are also known among Buddhists as Tiratana Triple-Gem or the Threefold-jewels. The Pali word ratana means that which pleases or that which gives delight, pleasure. The Jewels such as gold, silver and precious stones of all kinds are called ratana because they give delight, pleasure but worldly, material pleasure. Whereas the other three-fold Jewels, Buddha Dhamma and Sangha can give humanity real spiritual pleasure and therefore the Buddhists take them not only as jewels but also as their guides and refuges against the evil powers of greed, ill-will, delusion etc.

The Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha because He had boundless compassion for man's weakness, sorrow, disappointment and suffering, and because He found for all beings the path of deliverance by His own ceaseless effort through long and painful struggle. He has given men great encouragement and inspiration to fight against evil until they overcome it.

Secondly, the Buddhist takes refuge in the Dhamma because it enables one who follows it to attain the end of all dissatisfaction and suffering through the attainment of enlightenment, perfect wisdom and perfect equanimity. The best way to follow the Dhamma is to practise it in one's daily life. As we are all

subject to birth, old age, sickness, dissatisfaction, sorrow and death, we are all sick people. The Buddha is compared to an experienced and skilful physician while the Dhamma is compared to the proper medicine. However efficient the physician may be and however wonderful the medicine may be, we cannot be cured unless and until we take the medicine ourselves. Realisation is possible only through practice. Practice of the Dhamma is the only way in which one can truly express one's gratitude and veneration for the Buddha who, with infinite compassion, showed us the way to the end of all suffering. This fact was well illustrated by the story of a Bhikkhu who knew that the Buddha was about to pass away and yet remained in his cell and spent most of his time in meditation while the other disciples went to see and pay their respects to the Buddha. When this matter was brought to His notice, the Buddha sent for the Bhikkhu and asked him why he had behaved in such a peculiar manner. That Bhikkhu replied: "Lord, I know that you will pass away three months hence, and I thought that the best way to show respect to the Teacher is to attain Arahantship, sainthood, by practising the Dhamma even before your passing away."

The Buddha praised the Bhikkhu and said: "He who loves me should emulate this Bhikkhu. He honours me best who practises my teaching best."

Lastly, the Buddhist takes refuge in the Sangha because the Sangha is the living stream through which the Dhamma flows to humanity. Sangha literally means group, congregation and is the name for the community of the Noble ones (Ariya-Sangha) who have reached the Aryan noble stages of which the last is perfect sainthood (Arahatta). It is also the name for the community of Buddhist monks (Bhikkhus) who are striving to attain Arahantship by following the Dhamma. The Sangha is the point at which the Dhamma makes direct contact with humanity. It is the bridge between living man and absolute truth. The Buddha greatly emphasised the importance of the Sangha as a necessary institution for the well-being of mankind, for if there had not been the Sangha the teaching would have been a mere legend and tradition after the demise of the Buddha. It is the Sangha who have preserved not only the word of the Master but also the unique spirit of the noble teaching since the Master's passing away.