

WHAT IS BUDDHISM

By Ven. Punnaji

Buddhism as a religion does not separate itself from the other religions of the world. It does not claim monopoly over truth, dogmatically maintaining that it alone is the truth and everything else is false.

From a Buddhist point of view, different religions are only different forms or just one universal pursuit of mankind. It is the pursuit of mental perfection. Wherever human beings are found, religion is practised in some form or other. Religion is in the psychology of human beings just as music is. Just as in different cultures music takes different forms, in different cultures religion too takes different forms; these differences are only superficial, like a difference in style of dress.

Religion, wherever it is practised, is practised at four different levels; the level of faith and worship, the level of discipline of conduct, the level of mental purify or meditation and the level of insight into the truth about life. Even within the same culture, we find people practising religion at these different levels. This means that the practice of religion is actually an individual affair. Whatever the culture, each individual practises religion at his own level of spiritual development.

At these different levels of practice, the religious concepts differ even within the same culture. On the other hand, religious concepts at a particular level are similar even in different cultures. God at the level of faith of worship is seen as a supernatural almighty being, who is capable of answering the prayers of human beings. At the second level of discipline in conduct, God may be seen as a good person who is capable of judging man and who desires a man to be good. At the level of mental purity, God is seen as an indefinable pure being or infinite substance with whom union is desirable and with whom absorption is possible only to those whose minds are pure. At the level of insight, on the other hand, God is seen only as a concept or as the ideal of perfection, which man achieves in the practice of religion.

Religion seen this way is only a gradual path of human perfection. One who has reached the highest level of perfection is called an Awakened One, Buddha, or "God become".

From this, it is clear that Buddhists believe that Buddhism is merely religious practice carried to its highest level. They also believe that human beings could gain the highest degree of mental perfection through their own efforts, without the intervention of a supernatural being. God, in Buddhism, is only a concept.

It is the ideal of perfection that man conceives and tries to achieve in the practice of religion. Buddhists also believe that human beings do achieve this ideal from time to time when the practice of religion is carried to its ultimate point.

God from the Buddhist point of view is not a supernatural being up there in heaven. He is not the creator. He is merely any person who is perfect in knowledge and conduct, and this person is not an anthropomorphic god but a theomorphic man.

Buddhists do not believe that perfection is the private property of the creator and that human beings are merely sinners capable only of begging the mercy of the creator for pardon. Such a view is regarded in Buddhism to be pessimistic and is seen only to be an obstacle to a religious practice. Unlike in the West, Eastern religions have always emphasized the divinity of man and his potentiality for perfection.

Buddhists also do not believe in a Creator. They believe that the idea of a Creator is only a hindrance to the progress of religious practice. Buddhists do not believe in a supernatural origin of the world; they believe in a natural origin brought about by a process of conditionality. There is no first cause according to Buddhism. To speak of a first cause is to deny causality, because the first cause is a cause without a cause. Everything in the world originates due to conditions, and for the origin of a thing many conditions are necessary. So nothing originates due to a single cause. It is therefore not possible to speak of an ultimate beginning of this process of conditionality.

Though Buddhism is a religion without the concept of a Creator or a soul, it still has the concept of God as a perfect being, who is man himself at his highest. This concept of perfection of man is not human conceit; for the perfection is the achievement of complete selflessness by eliminating even the thought 'I am' from one's mind, realizing the idea of self to be an illusion. It is not the magnification of the self but the elimination of it. The highest perfection in religions practice is complete selflessness. God to Buddhists is one who does not think 'I am'.

It is with this conception of religion, of God, and perfection, that Buddhists set out to practise the religious life.

Washington Buddhist.