



Tolerance & Diversity

Today all the major religions of the world must respond to a double challenge. On one side is the challenge of secularism, a trend which has swept across the globe, battering against the most ancient strongholds of the sacred and turning all man's movements towards the Beyond into a forlorn gesture, poignant but devoid of sense. On the other side is the meeting of the great religions with each other. As the most far-flung nations and cultures merge into a single global community, the representatives of humankind's spiritual quest have been brought together in an encounter of unprecedented intimacy, an encounter so close that it leaves no room for retreat. Thus at one and the same time each major religion faces, in the amphitheatre of world opinion, all the other religions of the earth, as well as the vast numbers of people who regard all claims to possess the Great Answer with a skeptical frown or an indifferent yawn.

In this situation, any religion which is to emerge as more than a relic from humanity's adolescence must be able to deal, in a convincing and meaningful manner, with both sides of the challenge. On the one hand it must contain the swelling tide of secularism, by keeping alive the intuition that no amount of technological mastery over external nature, no degree of proficiency in providing for humanity's mundane needs, can bring complete repose to the human spirit; can still the thirst for a truth and value that transcends the boundaries of contingency. On the other hand, each religion must find some way of disentangling the conflicting claims that all religions make to understand our place in the grand scheme of things and to hold the key to our salvation. While remaining faithful to its own most fundamental principles, a religion must be able to address the striking differences between its own tenets and those of other creeds, doing so in a manner that is at once honest yet humble, perspicacious yet unimposing.

In this brief essay I wish to sketch the outline of an appropriate Buddhist response to the second challenge. Since Buddhism has always professed to offer a "middle way" in resolving the intellectual and ethical dilemmas of the spiritual life, we may find that the key to our present problematic also lies in discovering the response that best exemplifies the middle way. As has often been noted, the middle way is not a compromise between the extremes but a way that rises above them, avoiding the pitfalls into which they lead. Therefore, in seeking the proper Buddhist approach to the problem of the diversity of creeds, we might begin by pinpointing the extremes which the middle way must avoid.

The first extreme is a retreat into fundamentalism, the adoption of an aggressive affirmation of one's own beliefs coupled with a proselytizing zeal towards those who still stand outside the chosen circle of one's coreligionists. While this response to the challenge of diversity has assumed alarming proportions in the folds of the great monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam, it is not one towards which Buddhism has a ready affinity, for the ethical guidelines of the Dhamma naturally tend to foster an attitude of benign tolerance towards other religions and their followers. Though there is no guarantee against the rise of a militant fundamentalism from within Buddhism's own ranks, the Buddha's teachings can offer no sanctification, not even a remote one, for which a malignant development.

For Buddhists the more alluring alternative is the second extreme: This extreme, which purchases tolerance at the price of integrity, might be called the thesis of spiritual universalism:

the view that all the great religions, at their core, espouse essentially the same truth, clothed merely in different modes of expression. Such a thesis could not, of course, be maintained in regard to the formal creeds of the major religions, which differ so widely that it would require a strenuous exercise in word-twisting to bring them into accord. The universalist position is arrived at instead by an indirect route. Its advocates argue that we must distinguish between the outward face of a religion—its explicit beliefs and exoteric practices—and its inner nucleus of experiential realization. On the basis of this distinction, they then insist, we will find that beneath the markedly different outward faces of the great religions, at their heart—in respect of the spiritual experiences from which they emerge and the ultimate goal to which they lead—they are substantially identical. Thus the major religions differ simply in so far as they are different means, different expedients, to the same liberative experience, which may be indiscriminately designated “enlightenment,” or “redemption,” or “God-realization,” since these different terms merely, highlight different aspects of the same goal. As the famous maxim puts it: the roads up the mountain are many, but the moonlight at the top is one. From this point of view, the Buddha Dhamma is only one more variant on the “perennial philosophy” underlying all the mature expressions of man’s spiritual quest. It may stand out by its elegant simplicity, its clarity and directness; but a unique and unrepeated revelation of truth it harbours not.

On first consideration the adoption of such a view may seem to be an indispensable stepping-stone to religious tolerance, and to insist that doctrinal difference are not merely verbal but real and important may appear to border on bigotry. Thus those who embrace Buddhism in reaction against the doctrinaire narrowness of the monotheistic religions may find in such a view—so soft and accommodating—a welcome respite from the insistence on privileged access to truth typical of those religions. However, an unbiased study of the Buddha’s own discourses would show quite plainly that the universalist thesis does not have the endorsement of the Awakened One himself. To the contrary, the Buddha repeatedly proclaims that the path to the supreme goal of the holy life is made known only in his own teaching, and therefore that the attainment of that goal—final deliverance from suffering—can be achieved only from within his own dispensation. The best known instance of this claim is the Buddha’s assertion, on the eve of his Parinibbāna, that only in his dispensation are the four grades of enlightened persons to be found, that the other sects are devoid of true ascetics, those who have reached the planes of liberation.

The Buddha’s restriction of final emancipation to his own dispensation does not spring from a narrow dogmatism or a lack of good will, but rests upon an utterly precise determination of the nature of the final goal and of the means that must be implemented to reach it. This goal is neither an everlasting afterlife in a heaven nor some nebulously conceived state of spiritual illumination, but the Nibbāna element with no residue remaining, release from the cycle of repeated birth and death. This goal is effected by the utter destruction of the mind’s defilements—greed, aversion and delusion—all the way down to their subtlest levels of latency. The eradication of the defilements can be achieved only by insight into the true nature of phenomena, which means that the attainment of Nibbāna depends upon the direct experiential insight into all conditioned phenomena, internal and external, as stamped with the “three characteristics of existence”: impermanence, suffering, and non-selfness. What the Buddha maintains, as the ground for his assertion that his teaching offers the sole means to final release from suffering, is that the knowledge of the true nature of phenomena, in its exactitude and completeness, is accessible only in his teaching. This is so because, theoretically, the principles that define this knowledge are unique to his teaching and contradictory in vital respects to the basic tenets of other creeds; and because, practically, this teaching alone reveals, in its perfection and purity, the means of generating this liberative knowledge as a matter of immediate personal

experience. This means is the Noble Eightfold Path which, as an integrated system of spiritual training, cannot be found outside the dispensation of a Fully Enlightened One. Surprisingly, this exclusivistic stance of Buddhism in regard to the prospects for final emancipation has never engendered a policy of intolerance on the part of Buddhists towards the adherents of other religions. To the contrary, throughout its long history, Buddhism has displayed a thoroughgoing tolerance and genial good will towards the many religions with which it has come into contact. It has maintained this tolerance simultaneously with its deep conviction that the doctrine of the Buddha offers the unique and unsurpassable way to release from the ills inherent in conditioned existence. For Buddhism, religious tolerance is not achieved by reducing all religions to a common denominator, nor by explaining away formidable differences in thought and practice as accidents of historical development. From the Buddhist point of view, to make tolerance contingent upon whitewashing discrepancies would not be to exercise genuine tolerance at all; for such an approach can “tolerate” differences only by diluting them so completely that they no longer make a difference. True tolerance in religion involves the capacity to admit differences as real and fundamental, even as profound and unbridgeable, yet at the same time to respect the rights of those who follow a religion different from one’s own (or no religion at all) to continue to do so without resentment, disadvantage or hindrance.

Buddhist tolerance springs from the recognition that the dispositions and spiritual needs of human beings are too vastly diverse to be encompassed by any single teaching, and thus that these needs will naturally find expression in a wide variety of religious forms. The non-Buddhist systems will not be able to lead their adherents to the final goal of the Buddha’s Dhamma, but that they never proposed to do in the first place. For Buddhism, acceptance of the idea of the beginningless round of rebirths implies that it would be utterly unrealistic to expect more than a small number of people to be drawn towards a spiritual path aimed at complete liberation. The overwhelming majority, even of those who seek deliverance from earthly woes, will aim at securing a favourable mode of existence within the round, even while misconceiving this to be the ultimate goal of the religious quest.

To the extent that a religion proposes sound ethical principles and can promote to some degree the development of wholesome qualities such as love, generosity, detachment and compassion, it will merit in this respect the approbation of Buddhists. These principles advocated by outside religious systems will also conduce to rebirth in the realms of bliss—the heavens and the divine abodes. Buddhism by no means claims to have unique access to these realms, but holds that the paths that lead to them have been articulated, with varying degrees of clarity, in many of the great spiritual traditions of humanity. While the Buddhist will disagree with the belief structures of other religions to the extent that they deviate from the Buddha’s Dhamma, he will respect them to the extent that they enjoin virtues and standards of conduct that promote spiritual development and the harmonious integration of human beings with each other and with the world.

—Bhikkhu Bodhi

Publications

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This is one of the Buddha's most important discourses, his "all-embracing" critique of speculative views on the self and the world, which are captured in a net of sixty-two cases.

Also Received

Buddhism in South India. D.C. Ahir. Delhi:
Sri Satguru Publications, 1992. 210 pp. Ind. Rs. 200

Buddhist Texts through the Ages. Edward Conze, ed.
New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1993. 322 pp. Ind. Rs. 275

The Croup of Discourses (Sutta-Nipāta). Revised translation with introduction and notes by
K.R. Norman.
Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1992. 452 pp. U.K. £24.50.

Himalayan Buddhism: Past and Present. D.C. Ahir.
Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1993. 260 pp. Ind. Rs. 225.

The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History. E.J. Thomas.
New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992. 320 pp. Ind. Rs. 250.

Book Review

The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism. Uma Chakravarti. Delhi: Oxford University Press,
1987. 181 pp. plus appendices.

In her introduction to this book, Dr. Chakravarti points out the irony of the fact that although much of the modern interest in Buddhism is based on its social appeal, there has been up to now no full length study, based on careful reading of the texts, of early Buddhist social ideas, or of early Buddhism in relation to its social environment. Writers who have touched on the topic have tended to read their own prejudices into the texts and have come up with the conflicting conclusions that the Buddha was totally apolitical, a republican, a revolutionary or a defender of the autocratic status quo. Dr. Chakravarti, in good Buddhist fashion, takes an analytical approach to show that the Buddha was none of the above, and goes on to deal with a wide variety of topics concerning early Buddhist social theory and practice. Although the quality of her analysis varies from topic to topic, her good insights are very, very good, and provide an important perspective on the modern question of what, if anything, qualifies as a Buddhist social policy.

The weak parts of the book are the discussions of the social milieu at the Buddha's time and the social background of the early Buddhist community. Although the general outlines of the social situation in the Buddha's time are clear—the republics were in decline, while urban society, absolute monarchies and private ownership of property were on the rise—the data in the texts are simply too weak or contradictory to support many of the generalizations the author tries to make on these topics.

The strong point of the book is its analysis of early Buddhist social theory and policy. Here the texts offer ample, if scattered, evidence, and the author provides a careful, sophisticated and original reading of it. She shows that, unlike the Brahmanical social theory, the Buddhist analysis of society was based on economic function rather than caste. It saw society as divided into higher and lower classes, “higher” and “lower” referring not to their intrinsic worth, but to the general respect they were accorded by people at the time. Among the higher classes they placed the brahmanas, khattiyas and gahapatis (private landholders, ranging from peasants to the patriarchs of large estates). The Buddhists did not attempt to place these three classes in any hierarchy, except when inverting the Brahmanical hierarchy to humble the pride of the brahmanas and khattiyas. All three classes were equally respectable, and the interesting point is that even though the Buddha himself was a khattiya, and large numbers of his monastic following came from the brahmana and khattiya classes, his social theory embodies the interests of the gahapatis more than those of any other class.

The gahapatis’ basic concern was for protection of their private property. They wanted a government strong enough to protect them from thievery and social instability, but not so strong that it could exercise its power arbitrarily and confiscate their property at will. They thus had an ambivalent attitude towards the rise of absolute monarchies. Buddhist social theory reflects this same ambivalence. It neither recommended rebellion nor rationalized the status quo. Instead, it painted a picture of how the institution of monarchy could be transformed by the ideal king into an instrument for social peace and prosperity. The ideal king’s main duty was to provide for social stability and protection from crime. He was to do this by wiping out poverty through distributing his wealth, and by ruling fairly in accordance with the principles of Dhamma.

Such an ideal would obviously appeal to the gahapatis. (Interestingly enough, the Buddha never mention any of these ideas in his conversations with actual kings, all of whom fell far short of the ideal.) Dr. Chakravarti assumes that the collusion of Buddhist and gahapati interests here derives from the fact that the gahapatis were the main lay supporters of the Buddhist monastic orders. A deeper motive could be that, as the Anagata Bhayani Suttas point out, it is difficult for monks and nuns to practice the Dhamma in a society rent by instability and widespread poverty. Thus the true interests of the Buddhists and gahapatis met in the desire for a stable, prosperous social order.

In addition to pointing out the connections between the Buddhists and the gahapatis, Dr. Chakravarti has rendered an important service in pointing out the lack of connections between the Buddhist Sanghas and the political realm. Even though the Buddha numbered kings among his supporters, he never discussed political issues with them and never became involved in political controversies. His main political contribution was to teach a practical social ideal to people at large, perhaps secure in the knowledge that as the ideal gained wider and wider acceptance, it would ultimately affect those who actually wielded power.

Even thirty seconds’ mature reflection on these points will show that Dr. Chakravarti’s book, in providing a careful and original analysis of early Buddhist social theory and policy, has much to offer not only to those interested in early Buddhist history, but also to those who are exploring the relationship between Buddhism, social ideals and social action in today’s world. Although her work requires a judicious reading to separate the wheat from the chaff, the wheat is well worth the effort, and provides excellent food for thought.

—Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Guidelines to Sutta Study

The first question raised by the Buddha in the Fire Sermon is the question, “What is the ‘all’ that is burning?” and the reply that he gives (discussed in the previous newsletter) is that it is the all of our sensory and cognitive experience, our experience through the six sense faculties. The second question which the Buddha addresses is: “What is the fire that consumes the all?” His answer is: “It is burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion. It is burning with birth, ageing and death, with sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.” These eleven “fires” may be divided into two groups. On one side there are the causal fires: lust, hatred and delusion. On the other side there are the resultant fires: birth ... despair. Although these two groups may be equally entitled to the designation “fires” because they sear and consume the mind, they differ in regard to their mode of operation. The causal fires are dangerous not simply because they inflict present misery, but because they are capable of igniting resultant fires in the future. Greed, hatred and delusion, while consuming the mind with sorrow and grief, also throw off sparks from which flare up the resultant fires of new births. Once a new birth has taken place, in consequence we are then oppressed by the suffering of new aging and death, and the entire round of misery that arises in the course of a lifetime.

The causal fires are elsewhere called by the Buddha the three unwholesome roots. Considered psychologically, they are the most basic defilements of the mind, the springs that underlie all immoral conduct and all unwholesome states of mind. When describing the “all” upon which these fires feed, the Buddha ends his enumeration of the factors of cognitive experience with feeling—“what is felt as pleasant, painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant”—and this terminus of the analysis of cognition is the appropriate place to introduce the three fires. Just as different kinds of fire thrive on different kinds of fuel, a charcoal-fire on charcoal, a wood-fire on wood, etc., so each of the causal fires blazes forth with a different type of feeling as its fuel.

Lust (*raga*) arises in response to pleasant feeling. When we yearn for an anticipated pleasure, or cling to an immediate pleasant object, or hanker for some new pleasure to replace the old one that has faded away or grown stale, our mind is then burning with the fire of lust, which feeds on pleasant feeling as its fuel. Hatred (*dosa*) arises in response to painful feeling. When our desires are frustrated, our will opposed, our expectations disappointed, we are stricken with pain, misery and distress. Our mind then burns with anger, aversion, irritation—all flames that arise from the fire of hatred, burning with painful feeling as its fuel. Delusion (*moha*), being the root that underlies even lust and hatred, can be ignited by all three types of feeling—pleasant, painful and neutral. But delusion stands out most clearly in its own nature in relation to neither-painful-nor-pleasant feeling, when its, dim light is not outshone by the more incandescent fires of lust and hatred. Delusion then becomes manifest as confusion, perplexity, bewilderment, obtuseness. Although we hardly tend to think of delusion as a fire, if we reflect on the fact that all defilements and all suffering ultimately originate from ignorance—another term for delusion—we will then recognize that the Buddha was perfectly right to designate delusion too as a fire. The Buddha’s teaching in the Fire Sermon can acquire a deeper significance if we correlate it with his exposition of the twelvefold formula of dependent arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*). The causal fires would pertain to the causally active phase of the formula. To mix metaphors, they become the inner springs that drive the Wheel of Existence forward. The fire of delusion would be comprised by ignorance, the fire of lust by craving and clinging. The fire of hatred, not explicitly included by the formula, would be a natural offshoot of clinging, and thus may be subsumed under clinging. The resultant fires are the suffering that we must undergo as a consequence of lust, hatred and delusion: the factors of birth and ageing-and-death. Through our lust, hatred and delusion we engage in actions that drive forward the Wheel of Existence, bringing to pass a new psycho-physical organism with its six sense faculties, from which arise

the three types of feeling. As we continue to pursue the pleasant, to struggle against the painful, and to remain stupefied by the neutral, we burn with sorrow and grief and heap up a fresh stock of kamma that will rotate the wheel for still another turn.

In the last section of the Fire Sermon the Buddha answers the third question: “What is the consequence of seeing all as burning?” When one sees the eye as burning, the ear as burning, the nose, tongue, body and mind as burning; when one sees their objects as burning, their corresponding types of consciousness as burning, their corresponding contact as burning, the three modes of feeling which arise from contact as burning—when one sees thus, all delight in the experience of the senses fades away, all delight in the constructions and projections of the mind fades away. There then sets in a process of “disenchantment” (*nibbidā*), of turning away, that advances through a deepening detachment (*virāga*) and culminates in the mind’s liberation from all bonds (*vimutti*): “When he becomes disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. With dispassion, he is liberated. When liberated there is knowledge that he is liberated. He understands; Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.”

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