

## Am I a Buddhist?

### *Ajahn Jagaro*

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Teaching people who have only recently encountered Buddhism I am often asked the question "How do you become a Buddhist?" or "How do you know when you are a Buddhist?" This type of enquiry is indeed healthy and to be encouraged not only amongst those new to Buddhism but also for people born and raised as Buddhists. So go ahead and ask yourself: "Am I a Buddhist?"

I expect that there will be many who will answer "Yes" and those who say "No", but I wonder how many will be thinking "Oh ... Ahm,.. I don't know." So let us contemplate this business of being a Buddhist a bit more.

To begin our enquiry it may be worthwhile to know what the Buddha said on the matter. The following episode is taken from the Buddhist scriptures (*Anguttara Nikaya*, Vol IV):

"Once, the Lord dwelt amongst the Sakyans in the Banyan Tree Monastery at Kapilavatthu, and while there, Mahanama the Sakyan came to him and asked;

"How, Lord, does one become a lay disciple?"

"When one has taken refuge in the Buddha, the *Dhamma* and the *Sangha*, then one is a lay disciple".

"How, Lord, is a lay disciple virtuous ?"

"When a lay disciple abstains from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and drinking intoxicants, then he is virtuous."

Here the Buddha clearly states that by taking refuge in the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* one becomes a disciple or, in modern terminology, a Buddhist. The classical formula of going for refuge which has been passed down from the time of the Buddha is as follows;

***Buddham Saranam Gacchami*** (*I go for refuge to the Buddha*)

***Dhammam Saranam Gacchami*** (*I go for refuge to the Dhamma*)

***Sangham Saranam Gacchami*** (*I go for refuge to the Sangha*)

However one does not become a Buddhist through the mere repetition of these words nor by the performance of any other ceremony ritual or initiation. On the other hand, though one has not performed any ceremony or ritual, one may still be a Buddhist. Put simply, this means that no one can make you a Buddhist nor can anyone stop you from being a Buddhist. ***It is a volitional choice that one makes when one has sufficient confidence*** in the Teacher and the Teaching. In the commentaries to the scriptures it explains this as, "It is an act of consciousness devoid of defilements, motivated by confidence in and reverence for the Triple Gem"...

Here I would like to relate something of my own experience to help explain this point. When I first came in contact with Buddhism I did not consider myself a religious person. If anything, I thought of myself as an atheist and felt that religion had little relevance to real life. However I did find the Buddha's Teachings and in particular the practice of meditation very appealing. I had a desire to find out more about it and this led me into a monastery where I was eventually ordained as a monk.

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One day a young Thai student, wanting to practise his English, casually asked me "Are you a Buddhist?" But in my mind I wondered whether or not I was a Buddhist. I must confess that it was a strange position to be in – a Buddhist monk who doesn't know whether he is a Buddhist! Yet that situation persisted for over a year before the meaning of both the question and the answer became clear to me.

During that year as I continued to study and practise the *Dhamma* I began to feel very comfortable with the teaching and increasingly confident that this was the way for me. With this came the conscious recognition that I had chosen the Buddha as my Teacher and considered him as the embodiment of the spiritual ideals of peace and liberation. I had also chosen to follow the path contained in his Teaching (the *Dhamma*) being confident that it would lead to liberation. And while on this path I would seek the guidance and try to emulate the example of all the noble disciples who constitute the *Sangha*. It was indeed wonderful to discover that I was a Buddhist and not just a Buddhist monk!

Now becoming a Buddhist does not mean that one has to either agree with or believe in everything that is taught or practised by all the countless Buddhist sects and groups throughout the world. Nor do we have to believe that it is the only way and that all the other religions are no good. It simply means that having looked at and probed into this teaching of the Buddha, having tried it and having seen that it does work, one has confidence in it and chooses to take refuge in the Buddha, the *Dhamma*, and *Sangha*.

However if you are still unsure as to whether you are a Buddhist or you are not, don't worry about it, just keep on practising.

***With Metta,***  
Jagaro Bhikkhu.

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