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BUDDHISM AND THE FREE THINKERS



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Many so called free thinkers are actually not "free" thinkers, but they are lazy to think. Just because they do not want to think seriously and ponder about the meaning of their existence they say they are free thinkers. There is no room for these kinds of thinkers in Buddhism. Buddhism encourages people to think freely but deeply and without bias.

Immediately after gaining enlightenment, when there were many disciples, the Buddha said, "Monks, now you and I are free from human and divine bondages". Here, we can find a clue to what a free thinker is. Usually, people try to introduce their religious concepts and beliefs and practices by imposing divine bondages and appealing divine messages. The Buddha has rejected such concepts. He said he and his Disciples are free from divine and human bondage.

What are these bondages? They are various kinds of beliefs, cravings, attachments, concepts, traditions and customs created in the name of religion by exploiting fear and suspicion. People who are enslaved by such beliefs and practices are in bondage. In what way was the Buddha a free thinker or how can we claim that Buddhism is a religion of freedom and reason?

Freedom to Think Freely to Understand the Truth

The Buddha has given full freedom for man to think freely without depending on the concept of a god, a Buddha or any teacher to understand the truth. That is freedom. According to some western thinkers Buddhism is known as "the religion of freedom and reason". Freedom however must be guided by reason. Otherwise, people can abuse that freedom. For instance, if a government gives full freedom for people to live or to do anything according to their free will I am sure that within twenty four hours, they can ruin the whole country. That is the danger of giving freedom without first developing reason in the minds of people. We must follow the same principle in practicing religion.

Although some people say that free will exists for man to exert, we know that without proper training and guidance the use of that free will can lead to disastrous consequences. A child may have free will, but it has to be taught not to play with a live electric wire.

The Buddha emphasizes that freewill is not a gift from any external source. It is intrinsic to us. Human behavior, human character, humanistic minds are characteristics which are developed over many life times. Whether we are cultured or uncultured, civilized or uncivilized, religious or irreligious, good or bad, wicked or kind, depends on our mental habits which we developed life after life in the past. These characteristics are not given by anybody.

Religion becomes important to guide and direct man's way of thinking by giving proper guidelines. The purpose of religion is to help a human being train his mind so that he develops understanding and acts in a morally responsible way. He does good because he "knows" that is the right thing to do, not because he wants to avoid punishment or receive rewards. Religion is an aid to individual development.

Why should we not depend on anybody If we are going to stop our evil, wicked, selfish thinking fearing that there is somebody to punish us, we will never give a chance for our mind to cultivate understanding, kindness, compassion. People also sometimes do good deeds or provide some service to others in expectation of a big reward. If this is the motivation, they will not develop sympathy, understanding according to the true meaning of these words. They become selfish avoiding evil deeds to

escape punishment or do good to get rewards. This is selfishness. The Buddha did not advocate this. If heaven and hell were both closed down, how many people would remain religious? Buddhism however encourages moral behavior without reference to heaven or hell. This is the uniqueness in the Buddha's teaching.

A Religion of Freedom and Reason

The main purpose of religion is not to ensure escape from punishment or gain a reward but to help one become perfect and to end physical and mental suffering and be free from unsatisfactoriness.

The Buddha also wanted to cultivate humanity according to certain moral and ethical codes, discipline, and character. This is to be achieved without resorting to temptations provided by promises of heaven or to fear by threats of hell fire. That is why this religion is described as a religion of freedom and reason. The Buddha encouraged us to learn with an open-mind to investigate and to understand the world. We must accept nothing at once on mere faith. The Buddha says, "Do not accept anything through mere faith because it will make it difficult for you to understand the truth, because that faith can make you a blind follower.

This kind of blind faith can lead to religious fanaticism. People react emotionally to their religious authorities rather than deciding rationally whether something is true or false because they have not developed analytical knowledge in their minds to understand why they should uphold certain moral practices and why they should keep away from certain immoral practices.

For instance, when a boy cannot understand things properly, a father or mother threatens him. If he is very mischievous, they can even beat him and warn him not to make mistakes. Because of that fear, the child may stop doing mischievous deeds but he is not helped to realize why it is wrong and where the mistake is. That only creates fear of punishment. Again, when they ask a child to do something and if he refuses, then, the parents will bribe him with the promise of a reward. The child may do it, but again without understanding why. It will be easy for him to revert to the wrong way of thinking or action without understanding. Similarly, we should not introduce religion through reward and punishment, without allowing people to have proper understanding.

If we try to introduce religion through punishment and rewards, people will not understand the real validity and main purpose of religion. That is why in Buddhism there is no threat of religious punishment. The duty of a religion is to guide, educate and enlighten people.

Punishment is the duty of the law of the land. Religion should not undertake the role of the law to punish people. Otherwise, there will be fear but not understanding. This is the nature of the Buddha's teaching and why we regard him as a free thinker.

Religious Freedom

In the Buddha's time, there was a group of young people who could not understand how to choose a religion freely because at that time, there were more than sixty-two religious groups in India. So they approached the Buddha and told him about their problem. They said that they did not know how to select a proper religion. The Buddha did not say that Buddhism was the only true religion and that all other

religions were wrong. Then he gave certain guidelines for these young people to think freely without depending on the authority of teachers or religious leaders. This advice is an important aspect of the Buddha's doctrine.

Intellectuals all over the world appreciate the Buddha's attitude because of the liberal advice that the Buddha gave for people to think freely. The Buddha did not claim that he is the only true religious teacher and if one came and worshipped and prayed to him, one would be saved, one's sins would be forgiven, one would end up in heaven or nirvana after death. He also never suggested that we should disrespect other religious teachers. He said, "Respect those who are worthy of respect". Some people believe that if they worship or respect another religious teacher, they commit a sin.

This is because there are some religionists who warn that if their followers step into another place of worship, or read some other religious book or if they listen to another religious talk, they commit a sin and will be punished in hell. They want to show that they are allergic to other religions. This creates fear and keeps people ignorant. Buddhism does not encourage this kind of intolerant attitudes. Again, the Buddha says, "Accept the truth whenever it is available. Support everybody irrespective of their religions".

It is wrong to blindfold and mislead innocent people. By creating discrimination they propagate very unhealthy ideas in the name of religion. Because of that, many people have come to regard religion as a nuisance. Goodwill, unity, harmony and relationships amongst humanity are destroyed due to such hostile attitudes. Sometimes, members of the same family are divided into different groups through the influence of such religious attitude.

Buddhists have never been encouraged to adopt such hostile attitudes to spread Buddhism over the last 2,500 years. That is why Buddhists do not organize questionable methods to convert the followers of other religion into Buddhism. Buddhists do not think that it is very important to convert others, by thinking that the followers of other religion are sinners. The Buddha never instituted a method to baptize people or to forgive sins committed by them.

When you compare your religious freedom with that of others for example, you can appreciate the freedom that you enjoy from your birth up to your grave. There is no religious law in Buddhism that demands marriages to be performed according to religious dictates, since Buddhists do not believe that divorce is impossible just because it is recorded in heaven. If a marriage is recorded in heaven, then it must be just as possible to cancel it by requesting that the record be deleted! Isn't that true freedom?

We have to accept the duties and obligations taught in religion not as law but a free choice. We have to act according to our own conviction and according to our way of life. We must not blindly accept certain ready-made religious laws given by the religious authorities. Religion should not be accepted because of fear but with an open mind to know how to make use of life to serve others and to understand the meaning of existence.

Today, all over the world, people are fighting to propagate their own religious beliefs. They are fighting, harboring jealousy, and creating hatred towards other existing religions. There are people who had been practicing their religion for more than two or three thousand years as part of their cultural heritage or way of life. The rich legacy, rich psychology, philosophy, respectable and harmless life,

morals and ethics have helped them to lead a noble life. Yet, some other religious groups try to force them to accept their religious beliefs by promising to send them to heaven, as if they have been given the sole authority to monopolize heaven. They try to tell others that only through their religion, can people go to heaven.

According to Buddhism, the followers of any religion or even those who have no particular religious labels also can go to heaven. This they can do if they have cultivated their humane qualities and if they have not abused their human life and have maintained human dignity and human intelligence.

According to some religionists, a man who leads a harmless life, cannot go to heaven without first accepting their god. But a criminal who violates, endangers innocent people by committing all sorts of evil deeds gets the chance to go to heaven because he simply says a moment before his death, "I believe". They say if you embrace their religion, god forgives all the sins that you have committed and straight away, you get sent to heaven.

The criminal has the chance to go to heaven after violating peace and happiness of innocent people. According to them, a god can save the criminal but has no sympathy towards those who have become his victims.

If a god can save the culprit after committing evil deeds and harming others, why it is so difficult for him to stop those evil deeds before they were committed? Buddhists believe that whether people have different religious labels or even if they claim not to have any religion, if they are good, cultured people and if they do not harm others and if they have gentleness, they are considered respectable from the Buddhist point of view.

The biggest problem that we are facing is that we have so many traditions and customs introduced by our forefathers according to their way of thinking at that time. They had their own perspectives. In the past, science and technology and worldly knowledge about life and the world and the universe was very poor. Motivated by fear and ignorance they started various kinds of rites and rituals and ceremonies. Later these practices became traditions. These traditions were then formalized into various cultures. As Buddhists, we can accept these practices as part of our different cultures.

But we must not feel we are bound to accept and practice all these traditions. We respect culture, and tradition but at the same time must try to find out whether they are of any significance or meaningful and whether they are good for us as well as for others. If they are good for both sides, then we must accept them. If not, we should feel free to discard them and adopt new ways, which are relevant to our modern way of life.

How to Choose a Religion

When choosing a religion, we must avoid hearsay. People come and tell us all sorts of fascinating stories about various supernatural powers of their masters, gurus, teachers, religious practices, gods and goddesses. They exaggerate and beautify the incidents or stories and come and tell us to accept their beliefs. The Buddha's advice is not to accept what they say without considering it carefully. We have a

human mind to think but because of our weaknesses we do not give a chance for that mind to think without bias.

The Buddha advised us not to accept anything without weighing every argument impartially. If we do not, sooner or later we will come to know that what we accepted in a hurry is wrong.

One must not to depend on any holy book without studying it properly. Some people say that their holy books are true and others are wrong. They also say that it is a divine message, recorded by religious authority and we should accept it without question. The Buddha's advice is not to accept any of those things, which are recorded in the holy books without carefully consideration. Can you find another religious teacher who uttered such words? He has given credit to human intelligence. How much freedom he has given to us to seek a religion!

According to the Buddhist concept people can record anything in their books and later introduce them as holy books with divine messages. People accept these things without any question. Religious authorities use their power to control human beings as if they are small children. They have their ready-made religious concepts. So they hand over their concepts for people to accept and believe. Therefore, people have no chance to use their common sense or reasoning to understand things properly.

The next advice of the Buddha is not to accept anything through mere reasoning. Although we advise people not to accept anything without reasoning, the Buddha says we must not use mere reasoning. Our reasoning is very limited. Even small children can reason according to their way of thinking. We can reason out certain things within our thinking capacity. When we compare our reasoning with that of the great thinkers or scientists, then in the eyes of those high intellectuals, our reasoning is not accurate. When we compare the reasoning of those intellectuals with enlightened religious teachers' way of reasoning, we can understand that the intellectuals' reasoning is also not perfect.

That is why the Buddha says, accept the truth within your capacity but do not claim it as absolute truth at once. Allow your mind to reason things out. Allow it to grow, develop. Do not close your mind immediately. What you have accepted later can change according to experiences and maturity and proper understanding.

The next advice is not to accept anything through logical argument. Argument depends on ability, knowledge and skill and a talented attitude but not on truth and fact. Argument can arouse emotion and egoism.

The Three Natures

The main purpose of religion is to concentrate more on how to cultivate a noble human way of life, moral conduct, discipline, to maintain peace, happiness and confidence in the mind, and to promote liberation from fear, worry, anger, hatred and delusion rather than devoting more time for worshipping, praying and performing some rites and rituals.

Human beings have three characteristics. They are: the animal nature, the human nature and the divine or sublime nature. Religion is important to suppress or to control the animal nature in the human.

We cannot achieve this by only worshipping. If human beings also live only to eat, to seek protection and to procreate, then there is no difference between animals and humans.

However, the human being is different from the animal in that he can be taught to develop a superior mind. Religion is a powerful factor to help him in this task. There is an extraordinary characteristic in the human mind that is called Dharma.

The Dharma is based on our humane qualities. As human beings, we have to cultivate moral shame and moral fear. What is it? Fear of evil, wicked, cruel, dangerous things to be committed, that is called moral fear. On the other hand, as human beings we think it is shameful thing for us to do some bad, immoral things. That is called moral shame. To maintain human dignity, to give due credit to human intelligence, we have to develop moral shame and moral fear.

We have so many religions in the world and so many places of worship. In the East at least, the churches, mosques, temples and places of worship are crowded. They say, religion is progressing well. Everywhere we see people, praying and worshipping and burning joss sticks and papers but how many people are there amongst those worshippers who maintain moral shame and moral fear in them? If these natural, ennobling qualities are absent, is there true religion? Many of these people who proclaim their religion so loudly actually even lack humane qualities, let alone religious piety.

The Importance of Religious Principles

Religion can develop humane qualities in many ways. What are these qualities? We must have understanding to maintain human dignity and behave as human beings. We must learn how to live without disturbing or harming others which is more important than many other qualities. Cultivate goodwill and understanding. Whether we pray or not, we have to cultivate patience, tolerance, compassion and sincerity. How many human beings are there in this world today who truly have honesty in them? A real religion can cultivate these qualities. Science, technology or nuclear energy can manage to change the whole world but such energy also cannot change the human mind. Who can change it? We know that it is difficult even for a god to change our mind. No other external force can do that. We have to change our own minds. According to the Buddha, if there is anybody in this world who can change the mind, it is the individual himself, no one else.

We can be given ideas on how to do it. We can be told how to train the mind. We have to cultivate the mind through understanding and determination. That is why knowledge is important. By following the religious disciplines many changes take place in the mind for our betterment. Therefore, religious principles are important no matter where they are preached. Whether it is Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam makes no difference. If people can cultivate good qualities, everyone should be able to enjoy heaven without any discrimination. Heaven is not reserved for or monopolized by one particular religious group. It should be open to everybody who has good qualities.

The Buddhist concept of heaven is where one is happy, prosperous, fortunate and satisfactory for a long period. In one way we can say that the pleasures of heaven are simply an extension of the pleasures we seek on earth. But spiritual development or a sublime state of mind is more important than worldly pleasures.

We should not wait until divine qualities come down from heaven to purify us. We have to cultivate them by eradicating any animal nature we have in us. By developing our human nature we gain the divine nature or sublime state. It is a gradual development. Divine nature means leading a noble, pure life. The normal human behavior is uncertain and unpredictable and it is difficult to trust another human being. Almost everyday, we experience more fear, suspicion, tension because of human beings, rather than animals, devils or ghosts. Religion is important to cultivate those qualities against unreliable and selfish human attitudes.

What constitutes the sublime nature? The Buddha taught that there are four mental states we must develop: Metta, Karuna, Mudita, Upekkha. These four qualities must be there to gain that highest achievement in the mind. It simply means we must cultivate goodwill and virtue without any discrimination towards anybody or anything.

Buddhism teaches Metta (goodwill). Christianity teaches love. Islam teaches brotherhood. Hinduism teaches oneness in every human being. Many people have these qualities but they reserve them only for their own kind, those who belong to their club, so to speak. They extend goodwill, friendship and brotherhood towards their own community or towards the followers of their own religion, but not for others. That is not how the Buddha taught us to extend goodwill and compassion. He said we must radiate goodwill, harmony and sympathy towards every living beings without any discrimination and not only towards those who are close to us. In fact the Buddha says we must earnestly develop a heart full of love - like that a mother feels for her only child towards everything that exists.

The Need to Have a Religion

Many people claim to be free thinkers because they do not want to choose a religion. They simply refuse to have an opinion about such important matters as their existence and are even proud of it. This is not a very healthy state of affairs. Of course, each person is at liberty to choose his own religion according to his convictions.

To do this, he must find time to study and investigate. Nevertheless he should not condemn any particular religion just because he cannot understand or agree with it. Neither should he remain forever without a religion. He should find out a suitable religion for himself since there are existing rational and practicable religions in this world, accepted by intelligent people. A man without a religion is likened to an isolated small boat in a stormy sea.

An explanation of the purpose of life and salvation depends on religion. By practicing a rational religion one can train oneself to live as a cultured person and finally be able to achieve the aim of life. His wealth, academic knowledge, name, power and other embellishments cannot give him his peace of mind and happiness. A person without a religion will feel that something is lacking in him more particularly during the latter part of his life. Religion is the only friend which can give him satisfaction and consolation up to his last moment.

If all those so-called free thinkers do really think freely, they must maintain that attitude in all other aspects of their lives. Why do they want to represent themselves as free thinkers only with respect to religion?

Some people feel that if they can live as cultured people without following any religion, there is no necessity for them to possess a religion. Such people should remember that it was religion that taught mankind to live as cultured people. However religion does not mean mere religious labels but religious principles. There is no righteous way of life which religion has not influenced. Therefore man must not forget religion. Religion alone can turn the tide of selfish materialism and guide man towards the goal of selfless dedication and service to mankind. The benefits of religious instruction belong to the inner spirit of the human personality.

Religion and culture cannot be separated. When religious practices and beliefs penetrate the minds of the people for centuries they forget the religion but continue to practice these codes of behavior as part of their culture.

Misjudging of Religion

It has often been said that religions have failed to prevent war. Perhaps it would be more correct to say that many religionists have failed to put into actual practice the religious principles which they are supposed to profess. At times even so-called religious leaders have gone to the extent of encouraging killing without the least compunction justifying themselves by claiming they are Holy wars sanctioned by heaven.

War is war whether it is for the sake of the country or nation, culture or heritage, and language or religion; war in the name of religion is the most sinister act, because religion itself should teach us not to kill and to protect the sanctity of all forms of life.

One should not judge the merits or demerits of a religion simply by watching certain ill-conceived practices and beliefs adopted by ill-informed people in the name of religion. The original teachings of the great teachers are open to everybody.

It is very hard to find a single attitude of man with which religion is not involved. Those who do not claim to have a religion do in fact unconsciously observe certain religious principles which are to be found in every religion.

No religion was introduced into this world to mislead humanity. The founders of every religion revealed certain truths to guide man towards his destination. But the followers of those great teachers sometimes adopted various questionable methods and interpretations of their own to introduce their Masters' Messages. It is up to the people therefore to choose their particular religion which they feel is closer to reality.

Religion does not hinder the material progress of man if he really can understand and practice a proper religion. But religion does not encourage man to run after the mirage of illusory worldly pleasures to find his happiness.

We have seen already that much evil has been done in the name of religion, and that even today it is still possible for fanaticism of a pseudo-religious kind to incite man to commit grievous crimes against humanity.

Devoting Time to Religion

Some people might say that they have no time to devote to religion since they have so many other social and political and personal commitments to meet. The following statement would serve as an answer to such people:- "A man who puts aside his religion because he is going to join society is like one who takes off his shoes because he is about to embark on a journey."

A man who involves himself deeply in various activities of everyday society to the extent of forgetting his religion is making a mistake. Therefore, he needs more guidance from religion.

One need not abandon the world to practice religion. Running away from the duties of life is hardly of any use in a modern world, where every man and woman has to work to earn his or her keep. We are indeed destined to work, and we must have the courage to face it and try to get rid of the problems that it entails without causing harm to anybody.

Some people are scared of religions. These are generally due to the various questionable methods adopted by certain missionaries in propagating their beliefs. They do it in such a questionable and aggressive manner and with such undue persistence as to constitute a public nuisance.

There are some who hold that since they and they alone are in possession of the absolute truth and the means of salvation, they should not tolerate the views of others. Many crimes have been committed in the name of such unfounded doctrines. In reality the exaltation of intolerance is nothing but a cover for dogmatic beliefs that cannot meet the light of reasoned criticism.

Certain religions have not given a proper answer to the problem "Why we suffer in this world". They advise us to believe in something which we cannot agree with. What we want is to choose a religion in which we can find the real answer to our problems. Religion must not be a matter of blind faith.

Irreligion is sometimes propagated under the garment of religion. Religion, many people think, belongs to the temple or the church and the priests and is not a subject for the home, or the laymen. To many, religion is considered as only suitable to the old folks but not the young, to the women folks not the men, to the poor, not the rich.

To them religion could only be found within the covers of some musty books but not among the flowers that bloom so freshly in the fields. These ideas are the results of their negligence and laziness in matters concerning religion.

Today many people talk of religious freedom; but when we survey the world over it will be seen that real religious freedom is not practiced in most parts of the world. Real religious freedom does not only mean that people should have the freedom to practice their own religion but that they should also be given the liberty to choose

any religion to follow according to their own convictions. Very unfortunately few people have this freedom. There are various obstructions in their way and threats from every quarter.

In fact people must have the freedom to choose any religion if they cannot agree with the teachings of the religion to which they already belong. Those who cause obstruction to this attitude of religious freedom really rob man of his free will and thereby hinder his inner peace.

Religious beliefs and practices should not deprive or disgrace human dignity, education and human intelligence.