

THE BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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As ancient religions like Buddhism become established in Australia for the first time, we all need to rethink our understanding of religion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines religion as "the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship". This is not good enough! Since its beginnings in N.E. India 2588 years ago, Buddhism has never believed in a superhuman controlling power, nor has it acknowledged a personal God entitled to obedience and worship. The Buddha clearly rejected the existence of a creator God. Buddhism does not fit such definitions of religion as are found in such authoritative works as the Oxford English Dictionary. Yet Buddhism is understood by all as a religion.

We need to refine our understanding of the meaning of the word 'religion', so as to include such belief systems as Buddhism. At present, out of prejudice or intellectual laziness, Buddhism is being bent and misshapen to fit into old but comfortable ideas of religion. For example, I heard here earlier today a speaker state that the Buddha was another prophet of God. This simply is not true. The Buddha was neither God nor prophet of God. Buddhism dispenses with the need for such a God. As a wit once remarked, Buddhism is the world's only true non-prophet religion! So, it is unreasonable to change Buddhism to fit outmoded definitions of religion. Instead we need to change the definition.

Buddhism, like all religions, addresses the perennial questions about that which transcends the mundane. With its teachings on Karma and Reincarnation, with its mystical practices of meditation and insight, with its wisdom teachings and emphasis on the compassion that is non-violent, and with its rich liturgy of ceremony and ritual – Buddhism certainly qualifies as a religion. It is said that "fools rush in where angels fear to tread", but this saying obviously does not apply to Buddhists like me, so here is my attempt at a more inclusive definition of 'religion':

Religion: a belief system, bestowed or realised, which gives meaning to life in relation to that which transcends the mundane.

Definitions are valuable. The current, inadequate definitions of religion can exclude belief systems such as Buddhism and relegate the ideas that they contain. Excluding and demeaning such a large community of people has in the past, and will in the future, lead to strife for us all. Already such strife is apparent. In the seventeen years that I have been in Australia as a Buddhist monk, I have seen Buddhists disadvantaged in areas of life such as law, because their religious culture was misunderstood.

For example, Buddhist practice effectively extinguishes the emotion of guilt. When a Buddhist errs, they are taught to follow, what I call here in Australia, the AFL Code – Acknowledge, Forgive and Learn. The self-punishment that is guilt is seen as unhelpful. So should a Buddhist face sentencing in a court of law, their religion-based equanimity concerning what they have done can so easily be misconstrued by the sentencing Judge as a lack of remorse and a penalty more severe than otherwise handed down.

In another example, a Caucasian Buddhist some years ago discovered that her husband had been sexually abusing her two children. The husband went to jail and both she and her children were obliged by law to

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undergo counselling. In the period between the awful discovery and the first appointment with the counsellor, she had quickly come to terms with the trauma, accepted it and forgiven her husband. She had no more desire for a relationship with the man, but she bore him no ill will. When she said so to the counsellor it was viewed as denial and, in short, she would not be released from obligatory counselling until she admitted an anger at her husband that she simply did not have. It took a long and detailed letter from me to convince the psychologist in charge that her early acceptance and forgiveness were standard Buddhist practice and not denial, so that she could be released. By the way, her quick settling of the problem led to her children also accepting the trauma easily. Their scars were small ones and the family prospered.

I will give a last example, one that is personal. Buddhist monks split their time between serving the lay Buddhist community and their own spiritual development in seclusion. The latter requires a peaceful monastery, usually outside of the city, but not too distant. Then the monks take the qualities that they nurture in their monastery, such as compassion and wisdom, out into the city to serve the community. The local Buddhist monastery is looked on as the heart of the religion and the source of Buddhists' guidance. Our monastery in Serpentine, just south of Perth, has recently been threatened, first by a gravel pit 'next door', and then by a rifle range. Both threats were overcome. But a third development has been approved, sending huge clay laden trucks thundering along our monastery boundary from 6am–6pm for many, many days. So far we have been unable to stop what is threatening the very existence of our monastery. As the monastery is being threatened, so is the religious practice of the large lay Buddhist community who depend on our monastery. If we were a school, hospital or hospice, then the need for quiet would be recognised in planning law and trucking would be stopped. A monastery, in particular a Buddhist monastery, is not recognised in law and there is the root of our problem. Should our legislators recognise the vital importance of a monastery to the ordinary Buddhist, of which there are several hundred thousand already in Australia, then we would not be so disadvantaged.

In summary, Buddhists do not seek to be treated differently in law, they seek to be understood better by law. Nor do they have a 'divine' law, which they take as superior to secular law and which can override it. Even the Buddhist transcendent law of Karma is seen by Buddhists as finding expression in secular law, never displacing it. When our legal system takes on board not only the Judaeo-Christian paradigm but also other paradigms, such as the Buddhist and Aboriginal, then we will be moving to a more just legal system for all.