

## **Buddhism in a Nutshell (Extract)**

**Narada Thera**

### **Is Buddhism a religion?**

It is neither a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, for it is not "a system of faith and worship owing any allegiance to a supernatural being."

Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents. Here mere belief is dethroned and is substituted by confidence based on knowledge, which, in Pali, is known as *saddha*. The confidence placed by a follower on the Buddha is like that of a sick person in a noted physician, or a student in his teacher. A Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha because it was he who discovered the path of deliverance.

A Buddhist does not seek refuge in the Buddha with the hope that he will be saved by his (i.e. the Buddha's own) personal purification. The Buddha gives no such guarantee. It is not within the power of a Buddha to wash away the impurities of others. One could neither purify nor defile another. The Buddha, as teacher, instructs us, but we ourselves are directly responsible for our purification.

Although a Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha, he does not make any self-surrender. Nor does a Buddhist sacrifice his freedom of thought by becoming a follower of the Buddha. He can exercise his own free will and develop his knowledge even to the extent of becoming a Buddha himself.

The starting point of Buddhism is reasoning or understanding, or, in the Pali words, *samma-ditthi*.

To the seekers of truth the Buddha says:

"Do not accept anything on (mere) hearsay -- (i.e., thinking that thus have we heard it for a long time). Do not accept anything by mere tradition -- (i.e., thinking that it has thus been handed down through many generations). Do not accept anything on account of mere rumors -- (i.e., by believing what others say without any investigation). Do not accept anything just because it accords with your scriptures. Do not accept anything by mere suppositions. Do not accept anything by mere inference. Do not accept anything by merely considering the reasons. Do not accept anything merely because it agrees with your pre-conceived notions. Do not accept anything merely because it seems acceptable - - (i.e., thinking that as the speaker seems to be a good person his words should be accepted). Do not accept anything thinking that the ascetic is respected by us (therefore it is right to accept his word).

"But when you know for yourselves -- these things are immoral, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken conduce to ruin and sorrow -- then indeed do you reject them.

"When you know for yourselves -- these things are moral, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to well-being and happiness -- then do you live acting accordingly."

These inspiring words of the Buddha still retain their original force and freshness.

Though there is no blind faith, one might argue whether there is no worshipping of images etc., in Buddhism.

Buddhists do not worship an image expecting worldly or spiritual favors, but pay their reverence to what it represents. An understanding Buddhist, in offering flowers and incense to an image, designedly makes himself feel that he is in the presence of the living Buddha and thereby gains inspiration from his noble personality and breathes deep his boundless compassion. He tries to follow the Buddha's noble example.

The Bo-tree is also a symbol of Enlightenment. These external objects of reverence are not absolutely necessary, but they are useful as they tend to concentrate one's attention. An intellectual person could dispense with them as he could easily focus his attention and visualize the Buddha. For our own good, and out of gratitude, we pay such external respect but what the Buddha expects from his disciple is not so much obeisance as the actual observance of his Teachings. The Buddha says -- "He honors me best who practices my teaching best." "He who sees the Dhamma sees me."

With regard to images, however, Count Kevserling remarks -- "I see nothing more grand in this world than the image of the Buddha. It is an absolutely perfect embodiment of spirituality in the visible domain."

Furthermore, it must be mentioned that there are no petitional or intercessory prayers in Buddhism. However much we may pray to the Buddha we cannot be saved. The Buddha does not grant favors to those who pray to him. Instead of petitional prayers there is meditation that leads to self-control, purification and enlightenment. Meditation is neither a silent reverie nor keeping the mind blank. It is an active striving. It serves as a tonic both to the heart and the mind. The Buddha not only speaks of the futility of offering prayers but also disparages a slave mentality. A Buddhist should not pray to be saved, but should rely on himself and win his freedom.

"Prayers take the character of private communications, selfish bargaining with God. It seeks for objects of earthly ambitions and inflames the sense of self. Meditation on the other hand is self-change." -- Sri Radhakrishnan.

In Buddhism there is not, as in most other religions, an Almighty God to be obeyed and feared. The Buddha does not believe in a cosmic potentate, omniscient and omnipresent. In Buddhism there are no divine revelations or divine messengers. A Buddhist is,

therefore, not subservient to any higher supernatural power which controls his destinies and which arbitrarily rewards and punishes. Since Buddhists do not believe in revelations of a divine being Buddhism does not claim the monopoly of truth and does not condemn any other religion. But Buddhism recognizes the infinite latent possibilities of man and teaches that man can gain deliverance from suffering by his own efforts independent of divine help or mediating priests.

Buddhism cannot, therefore, strictly be called a religion because it is neither a system of faith and worship, nor "the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of the existence of a God or gods having power over their own destiny to whom obedience, service, and honor are due."

If, by religion, is meant "a teaching which takes a view of life that is more than superficial, a teaching which looks into life and not merely at it, a teaching which furnishes men with a guide to conduct that is in accord with this its in-look, a teaching which enables those who give it heed to face life with fortitude and death with serenity," or a system to get rid of the ills of life, then it is certainly a religion of religions.

### **Is Buddhism an ethical system?**

It no doubt contains an excellent ethical code which is unparalleled in its perfection and altruistic attitude. It deals with one way of life for the monks and another for the laity. But Buddhism is much more than an ordinary moral teaching. Morality is only the preliminary stage on the Path of Purity, and is a means to an end, but not an end in itself. Conduct, though essential, is itself insufficient to gain one's emancipation. It should be coupled with wisdom or knowledge (*pañña*). The base of Buddhism is morality, and wisdom is its apex.

In observing the principles of morality a Buddhist should not only regard his own self but also should have a consideration for others we well -- animals not excluded. Morality in Buddhism is not founded on any doubtful revelation nor is it the ingenious invention of an exceptional mind, but it is a rational and practical code based on verifiable facts and individual experience.

It should be mentioned that any external supernatural agency plays no part whatever in the moulding of the character of a Buddhist. In Buddhism there is no one to reward or punish. Pain or happiness are the inevitable results of one's actions. The question of incurring the pleasure or displeasure of a God does not enter the mind of a Buddhist. Neither hope of reward nor fear of punishment acts as an incentive to him to do good or to refrain from evil. A Buddhist is aware of future consequences, but he refrains from evil because it retards, does good because it aids progress to enlightenment (*bodhi*). There are also some who do good because it is good, refrain from evil because it is bad.

To understand the exceptionally high standard of morality the Buddha expects from his ideal followers, one must carefully read the Dhammapada, Sigalovada Sutta, Vyaggapajja

Sutta, Mangala Sutta, Karaniya Sutta, Parabhava Sutta, Vasala Sutta, Dhammika Sutta, etc.

As a moral teaching it excels all other ethical systems, but morality is only the beginning and not the end of Buddhism.

In one sense Buddhism is not a philosophy, in another sense it is the philosophy of philosophies.

In one sense Buddhism is not a religion, in another sense it is the religion of religions. Buddhism is neither a metaphysical path nor a ritualistic path.

It is neither sceptical nor dogmatic.

It is neither self-mortification nor self-indulgence.

It is neither pessimism nor optimism.

It is neither eternalism nor nihilism.

It is neither absolutely this-worldly nor other-worldly.

It is a unique Path of Enlightenment.

The original Pali term for Buddhism is Dhamma, which, literally, means that which upholds. There is no English equivalent that exactly conveys the meaning of the Pali term.

The Dhamma is that which really is. It is the Doctrine of Reality. It is a means of deliverance from suffering, and deliverance itself. Whether the Buddhas arise or not the Dhamma exists. It lies hidden from the ignorant eyes of men, till a Buddha, an Enlightened One, realizes and compassionately reveals it to the world.

This Dhamma is not something apart from oneself, but is closely associated with oneself. As such the Buddha exhorts: "Abide with oneself as an island, with oneself as a refuge. Abide with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as a refuge. Seek no external refuge." - *Parinibbana Sutta*