

A Better Understanding to The Concept of Religions and the Dhamma

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Where there is a religion there is a creator. Then, there are messengers, priests, organized institutions such as temples, churches and mosques and many types of prayers, processions and pujas etc. ***Religion, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means “belief in the existence of a supernatural ruling power, the creator and controller of the Universe, who has given to man a spiritual nature which continues to exist after the death of the body”.***

Whatever religious belief religion creates, it is a desire for happiness. Once we attach ourselves to happiness, there is fear, namely that it can cease. So people bow down to God, or many gods, and people have fear of sin and punishment for sin. Thus religion arises. Fear is an emotion and it springs from desire or affection (pematō jayati bhayam)¹. As far as people have fear of God, fear of punishment, fear of sin, there is religion. Once the Buddha said, ***“Driven only by fear, do men go for refuge to many places- to hills, woods, groves, trees and shrines. Such indeed is no safe refuge; such is not the refuge supreme. Not by resorting to such a refuge is one released from suffering”.***

The Buddha’s instruction for this was very clear. He said that ***those who penetrate with transcendental wisdom, the Four Noble Truths namely- suffering (dukkha), the cause of suffering (samudaya), the cessation of suffering (nirodha) and the Noble EightFold Path leading to the cessation of suffering (magga) have indeed a safe refuge, a refuge supreme. Having gone to such a refuge, one is released from all bondage. The only safe refuge is such transcendental wisdom, intuitive wisdom.***

Religion in the garb of mere faith makes man blind and curbs his spiritual progress to enlightenment and intuitive wisdom. The mere pursuit of devotion does not provide liberation from bondage. It is the way of knowledge (Nyana magga) that provides liberation from all bondage, through intuitive wisdom.

In the 6th century B.C. in India there were a lot of religious cults based on faith. And also many kinds of “isms” such as; eternalism, materialism, monism, pluralism and individualism. But the Buddha discovered that whatever those “isms” and “views” were they all lead to error and mental confusion. With clear comprehension of the meaninglessness of devotion, ***the Buddha taught the way of knowledge (Nyana magga), which leads to the realization of the truth, namely the cessation of suffering.***

Religion with many types of pujas does not pave the way to liberation from suffering. Such religions can blind man easily and drag him to Samsara, namely the cycle of birth and death. The cycle of birth is compared to the ocean or to the desert because of its endlessness and unending

¹ Dhammapada,v.213.

hardships. Therefore religion without wisdom, without a clear path of deliverance to man is dangerous.

Ven.Dr.K.Sri Dhammananda, on one of his articles stated thus; “According to Buddhism, there is no God or any other religious teacher who can send people either to heaven or hell. Man creates his own heaven and hell through his own thought, word and action. Therefore, praying to a third party without removing the evil thought from the mind is not much use”.

The word “clear” is very significant in this context. The path on which we have to move forth should be clear to ourselves. It should not be mere belief or myths. On the other hand it should not be pure intellectually either. It must be necessarily an experience that one has. That experience is the experience of the Dhamma.

For this purpose ***we ourselves, and by ourselves, should tread the Path. The Buddhas are there to show the path (tumhehi kiccham atappam akkhataro tathagata)². If we do not understand what is the path and what is not the path, religion really becomes a blind to man*** that covers the reality. In that sense, what Karl Marx said about religion being opium for man may be true. His statement would more correct if it is said that “religion without wisdom is opium to man”. Even today in many countries, in the name of religion, many irreligious activities are taking place. In our society, in the name of religion, today, people believe in pujas, rites and rituals to obtain worldly gains and worldly pleasures.

Temples, Churches and mosques are built, sometimes, against each other in places even, which are environmentally unsuitable. The statues of religious leaders are erected in many places to show religious devotion. They perhaps are dishonour to the religious leaders themselves. Poor people are converted to religion through material gifts for their daily economic satisfaction. In short, unfortunately, religions have become a means of dividing human beings. As I see, today there are three ways of dividing people. They are religions, ethnicity and politics. In the Vasala sutta of Sutta Nipata, the Buddha clearly mentioned that the human dignity is not classified according to their caste or wealth but only by their actions, words and thoughts (Na jacca vasalo hoti, na jaccha hoti brahmano; Kammuna vasalo hoti, kammuna hoti brahmano)³.

Originally these three served as corner stones for the well being of human beings. We know very well that in its pure form these three ways were extremely important for the progress of mankind though now these have shown their limitations. These have been corrupted by the people themselves. ***But the Dhamma is above all. The Dhamma belongs to none. It belongs to nature. It is the Universal law. It is the teaching of the Buddha (The fully Enlightened One). It is certainly to be studied, more to be practised, and above all to be realised by oneself. Mere learning is of no avail without actual practice. The learned man who does not practise the Dhamma, the Buddha says, is like a colourful flower without scent.***

The term often used to denote the teaching of the Buddha is “Buddhism”. This term “Buddhism” is a western coinage. The word of the Buddha is not an “ism” and it is not mere a religion either. ***The Buddha never wanted to introduce another “ism” or a religion.*** He taught the Dhamma to eradicate all kinds of isms. This Dhamma is the Universal law. It does not belong to anyone. It is for all, for all human beings. It has six characteristics namely it is well proclaimed (Svakhato), visible here and now (Sanditthiko), bears immediate fruit (Akaliko), invites investigation (Ehi Passiko), is onward leading (Opanayiko) and is directly capable of being experienced by the wise (Paccattam Veditabbo Vinnuhi).

² Dhammapada,v.276

³ Sutta Nipata, v.136

The Dhamma cannot be defined as just a religion. It is more than a conventional religion, which offers happiness in the term of what we enjoy on the earth, namely enjoyments in terms of happiness, which we can comprehend on earth. The Dhamma is something more than that. Its ethical system can give the offerings of pleasure that the “heaven-religions” can give. But the summon bonus of the Dhamma is not to offer just so called “eternal life” in the heavens with all its attractions. It takes you above all that, above all conditioning and dependence.

As it does not belong to Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, Muslims or any other religious group, it can be experienced by anyone who is wise enough to realize it as it is. The Dhamma is the Dhamma. That is none other than the nature of arising and passing away of phenomena. The main characteristic of the whole system of the world is that. It is ever changing. Whatever is in the nature of arising, it is necessarily in the nature of passing away. This truth is to be penetrated by the wise and realized not as it appears to be or as it seems to be, but as it is (yatha bhutam). This according to the teaching of the Buddha, can be realized only through Insight meditation (Vipassana Bhavana)

Indeed, as many of you know, Buddhism deals with ethical, social, economic, religious and political aspects. According to the stanza in the ***Dhammapada number 183 (Buddhavagga) the teaching of the Buddhas is in three categories. To avoid all evil (Sabbapapassa akaranam): to cultivate good (Kusalassa Upasampada): to cleanse one’s mind. (Sacitta Pariyodapanam).***

So, the first two of the above go with other religions but the last one which is to be cultivated with one’s mind is the unique feature in the teaching of the Buddha. That is the Dhamma. This Dhamma is something to do rather than talk about for hours and hours. The ***Dhamma is not a religion according to its dictionary meaning because it has no centre in God, as is the case in all other religions. It is a path to liberation. It is a system of philosophy coordinated with a code of morality, physical and mental. Extinction of suffering and death is the goal of the Dhamma.*** The inner peace and purity of mind is the result of the Dhamma, which can be secured by one and all irrespective of their religion or creed provided they practise it sincerely. When it is practised, the most significant factors are mindfulness and equanimity. These two are just like the two wings of a bird, two wheel of the cart.

The practice is nothing but meditation. As most of us know, that meditation is mainly twofold, namely, concentration (Samatha) and Insight (Vipassana). The purpose of concentration meditation is the achievement of heightened consciousness characterized by a high degree of tranquillity and mental peace. The highest consequences of concentration meditation can cause to arise refined states of awareness such as the four fine material absorptions (rupavacarajjhana) and the four formless absorptions (arupavacarajjhana). According to the Ariyapariyesana Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya, it is very clear that the recluse Siddhatta Gotama attained these eight types of absorptions. But all these absorptions were incapable of producing the definite enlightenment, which He sought. That was why He abandoned the two teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, with whom He had been practising, and struck out on His own. The result of His tireless endeavour was Vipassana, the Insight, the ability to see things as they really are (yatha bhutam), that is the Dhamma realised by the Buddha.

The Buddha said, “This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise”. This Dhamma could be realised only through Vipassana meditation, which is something unique to the teaching of the Buddha.

When we talk of meditation, it is obvious that there is meditation in other religions too. But the difference is that we do not come across “Insight meditation” through which one can attain one’s enlightenment as a result of one’s own progress in practice. The Buddha’s teaching is the practice of Insight meditation. There is nothing to do with rites and rituals in His teaching. It is not an exercise in

metaphysical speculation or theological construction. We all have to practise the Dhamma in daily life. That is a Way of Life. The Buddha's kind admonition for us is to meditate.

In the Sallekha Sutta of the Majjhima Nikaya IV, addressing the Ven. Cunda, He said, "What should be done for His disciples out of compassion by a teacher who seeks their welfare and has compassion for them, that I have done for you Cunda. There are these roots of trees, these empty huts. Meditate, Cunda, do not delay or else you will regret it later. This is our own instruction to you". On another occasion, this above exhortation was given in different manner, in the Dhammapada, but insistently and severely." Meditate, O monk! Do not be heedless. Let not your mind whirl on sensual pleasures. Heedless, do not swallow a red-hot iron ball, lest you cry when burning "O this is painful!"

Therefore meditation is a must in the teaching of the Buddha. Whatever other religious activities are performed, they all are to be put into second or third place. There is nothing beneficial without practising. The Dhamma is to be practised in daily life. It is not for the world beyond. When one practises the Dhamma, one can get experience and that experience is more important than only listening to, or talking on the Dhamma. A person, who recites the sacred texts without putting them into practice, is just like the cowherd who only counts the cows of others. Though he counts them he never gets ghee, milk or curd. On the contrary, practising the Dhamma one should not insult those who do not practise it. There are people who can practise and there are those who cannot do so because their level of understanding never allows them to do so.

We know there are some people who though do not meditate, study, scrutinize and discern the Dhamma. They teach the Dhamma. So that is also a great help for those who want to understand the significance of the Dhamma. One should not look down on them.

According to the discourse on Scholars and Meditators in the Anguttara Nikaya, the Ven. Maha Cunda, addressing the monks said, "Brethren you should train yourselves thus: Though we ourselves are Dhamma-experts, we shall give praise also to those monks who meditate. And why? Such outstanding men are rare in the world those have personal experience of the Deathless Element (Nibbana). And the other monks too, should train themselves thus " Though we ourselves are meditators we shall give praise also to those monks who are Dhamma-experts. And why? Such outstanding men are rare in the world who can by their wisdom clearly understand a difficult subject". "The Dhamma exists only where there is equanimity and wisdom.

Once the Buddha said "The monk who abides in the Dhamma, delights in the Dhamma, meditates on the Dhamma and bears the Dhamma well in mind, does not fall anyway from the sublime Dhamma".

Thus practising the Dhamma one has to practise meditation. The meditation introduced by the Buddha is Insight meditation, which eradicates all defilements. This Insight meditation is unique to the teaching of the Buddha. It is nothing but the very Dhamma that the Exalted One taught. Once the Ven. Anuruddha, one of the chief disciples of the Buddha, reflecting upon the Dhamma said:

This Dhamma is for one of few wants; it is not for one who wants much.

This Dhamma is for the contented; it is not for the discontented.

This Dhamma is for the secluded; it is not for one who loves company.

This Dhamma is for the energetic; it is not for the indolent.

This Dhamma is for one of vigilant mindfulness; it is not for one of lax mindfulness.

This Dhamma is for one of concentrated mind; it is not for one who is unconcentrated.

This Dhamma is for the wise; it is not for one without wisdom.

Then the Buddha approved these statements, saying, "Well done, Anuruddha, well done, well have you reflected on the seven thoughts of a great man".

According to the statements reflected by Ven.Anuruddha, we may conclude that ***“Man is not meant for Buddhism, but Buddhism is meant for man”***.

As we mentioned earlier, there are two kinds of meditation; Tranquillity (concentration) and Insight. These both are equally important in the process of meditation. When one meditates, one has to meditate on one's aggregates because the nature of the whole world could be realised through one's five aggregates (pancakkhandha).

Although Insight meditation is peculiar to the teaching of the Buddha, it begins with concentration or tranquillity exercises (Samatha). The difference in Insight meditation is that one does not go on to higher degrees of concentration and absorption. The three characteristics of existence, namely, impermanence (anicca), soullessness (anatta) and suffering (dukkha) could be comprehended, only through Insight meditation. That is why in the teaching of the Buddha these three characteristics of existence are elaborated. The purpose here is to achieve complete, direct and immediate awareness of all phenomena, which reveal their basic impermanence impersonality or the absence of any lasting essence or self-entity (atta) in them.

Insight meditation is a gradual process towards the development of mind. It should be practised with perfect equanimity and perfect awareness, intelligently, diligently, patiently and persistently. When one meditates with full dedication attentively and vigilantly, one can understand and realise things as they really are, the nature of arising and passing away. That is the ever-changing nature of phenomena. The Buddha said, “There is no meditative concentration for him who lacks Insight, and no Insight for him who lacks meditative concentration. He in whom are found both meditative concentration and Insight indeed is close to Nibbana. The monk who has retired to a solitary abode and calmed his mind, who comprehends the Dhamma with Insight, in him there arises a delight that transcends all human delights. Whenever he sees with Insight the rise and fall of the aggregates, he is full of joy and happiness. To the discerning one this reflects the deathless”.

When the Dhamma is practised by oneself little by little, moment-by-moment, and day-by-day in one's daily life, in this manner, one can remove one's impurities as a smith removes the dross from silver.

Further he can control his senses, enjoy contentment, and practise restraint according to the code of discipline. Then he associates with good friends (kalyanimitta). As a result he is contented, energetic, wise and pure in life, cordial and refined in conduct. When he develops his Vipassana meditation, he is full of joy and makes an end of suffering. Just as the jasmine creeper sheds its withered flowers, even so he sheds lust and hatred totally. Having traversed this miry perilous and delusive round of existence, he crosses over and reaches the shore; meditative, calm, free from doubt and clinging to nothing, he attains to Nibbana.

May all beings attain enlightenment!

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