

BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVES ON INTERFAITH RELATIONS

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Abstract

Religions should not be a tool to divide people, but should be used to bring unity. In this sense, there should be an urgent call for every follower of different beliefs to come and discuss in order to avoid misunderstanding among followers of different faiths. This is when people, regardless of their faith, work to promote interreligious relations and mutual understanding. As we like to put it, we are working to encourage interfaith relations. In the case of interfaith relations, Buddhism should be one of the tools to bring the people of different faiths closer together. Buddha has been a great role model of interreligious work. So there are some understanding Buddhists today. If we want to unite people from different faiths, Buddhism should have its place in the interfaith work.

Keywords: Interfaith relations; Metta

Introduction

The term “Interfaith” has been widely used among religious scholars who work to promote interreligious understanding. However, some basic religious followers, especially those in remote parts of some countries, like Cambodia and Thailand, are not very familiar with this word—let alone the concept of the word. I myself—then a fourth-year student—heard and understood the word and its concepts very shortly before I joined the writing competition on “Interfaith Relations and Higher Education”. So I find it useful to define the term “Interfaith Relations”. Tess Kelley defined “interfaith” shortly, as “Inter” means between or among and “faith” as complete trust, commonly used in a religious context¹

Interfaith relations is the interaction or communication among or across different religions or beliefs. It is when people from different religions or beliefs come to work together without religious bias, regardless of their religious backgrounds and beliefs, in order to work for more peace for all people in the world. Interfaith relations occur when people from Buddhism background, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and many other faiths can live and work together without conflicts based on religious bias. Interfaith

¹Illinois Wesleyan University, 2013-2014, p6.

work has many aspects: peace and justice, community and friendship, conversation and action.²

The goal of interfaith work, according to Kelly, is to create common experiences and to understand the individuality of perspectives on those experiences in light of beliefs. Kelly believes that every [religious] perspective is welcome to the conversation.

In the absence of conversations and mutual understandings, conflicts can happen among and between religions and beliefs. Thus, interfaith relations is a very important tool to create peace and harmony in today's world. Buddhism contributes with a great deal of perspectives on religious harmony and interfaith relations.

In this short article, I will seek to explain some basic perspectives desired from the Buddha's teachings relating to interfaith work, and how Buddhist people should act toward other non-Buddhists.

Buddha and other Religions

There were about 62 different religions in India at the time of the Buddha³. But the Buddha was not against any single religion. He did not provoke hatred toward those with different beliefs than his. Instead, he felt so compassionate towards all people - his disciples and the followers of other religions equally alike. He treated them as fellow human beings, not his opponents. He treated them as brothers and sisters, relatives and friends, not enemies. His loving kindness is not only for his followers, but for all human beings.

On many different occasions, the Buddha was asked what religion was a good religion. Instead of saying his religion was the best, he gave some remarkable points which serves as the clues showing that the Buddha himself was not opposed to other religions. In fact, he was open-minded to other faiths.

One day, on his deathbed, very shortly before he passed away, a young man, named Soppadda, approached him. After finding his seat and asking how the Buddha was, Soppadda started the important conversation with the Buddha. The young man asked the Buddha: "O Lord, many people, particularly some famous religious teachers, said they are also the enlightened ones, and their religions were superior to those of others. Is that true?"

The Buddha did not make the problem worse. He told the man to forget about that. He then explained "Sappadda, where the eightfold paths are taught—no matter what the religious labels are—there should be the path to liberation and salvation." What the Buddha wanted to say here is that the truth does not belong to any particular religion. This goes to show that the Buddha

²Illinois Wesleyan, p1.

³Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994, p4.

was tolerant to others who held different beliefs. This young man, in fact, was not a Buddhist, but the Buddha talked to him very gently. The Buddha did not discriminate this young man just because he adhered to a different region faith. Instead, he welcomed him so warmly, and the lord talked to him just as he would talk to his disciples.

The Buddha had worked very hard to promote interreligious understanding and interfaith relations. He encouraged his followers to have compassion towards all beings, regardless of their religions or sects. He himself was a great example.

Once the Buddha was challenged by a disciple of Nigantha Nataputta, whose name was Upali.⁴ After some time of hard talks, Upala agreed that the Buddha's view was right, and his teacher's was wrong. He then decided to become a disciple of the Buddha. However, instead of accepting him immediately, the Buddha asked him three times for reconsidering his decision. Upali said he had decided correctly. Then the Buddha accepted him as one of his disciples. The Buddha did not tell him to forget his former religious teacher, but the Lord sincerely requested him to respect and support that teacher just as he used to do.

In this example, the Buddha appreciated other religious teachers so much that he did not ban his followers from respecting other teachers. In addition, in Mangala Sutta, he advised his disciples to respect and worship those people who are worthy of respects and worships, regardless of their religious backgrounds.

In many different places and on various occasions, he was asked to share his views concerning other religions. He, as always, did not claim that his teaching was the only correct one, but he tried to find good parts in others, too. This clearly shows that the Buddha was the one supporting interreligious work and conversations.

Buddhist and interfaith perspectives

Devoted Buddhists who follow the Buddha's teachings in earnest do not act against followers of other religions. They do not see followers of other religion as a threat or enemies, but friends. Only those Buddhists who claim they are followers of the Buddha, but fail to study and practice what the Buddha taught may act against or inflict religious conflicts against non-Buddhists. However, there are only few of them. In general, good Buddhists extend their loving-kindness to all regardless of their religious faith.

King Asoka, the great Buddhist Emperor of India in the third century, honored and supported all other religions in his empire (Rahula, 1959, p4). He believed and declared his edicts carved on rock that "One should not

⁴Rahula, 1959, p4.

honor only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others' religions for this or that reason"⁵

We can see here that the King was very open-minded towards all religions. He advised people not to look down on the religions of others. In addition, he told us to honor others' religions because they are also good people. Good people are to be respected, no matter what religion they believe in. We cannot say that only Buddhists are good and the followers of other religions are not. There are good people in all nations and religions.

King Asoka believed that doing so, one helps one's own religion to grow and render service to the religions of others, too (Rahula, 1959, p4). His belief is exactly correct and true. When people from different beliefs respect each other and do good to each other, they are respecting and practicing their own religions because all religions tell the followers to do good to all beings, regardless of beliefs. This is all the more important for the followers of the Buddha. They are supposed to extend Metta to all beings. Metta means Universal Loves. So good Buddhists loves the followers of other religions as their relatives.

King Asoka can be a very good example of Buddhists who work to promote interfaith relations. He, as a Buddhist king, did not force his people to believe in Buddhism. Instead, he encouraged them to practice what they believe.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama is another example. He has done many great deals of interfaith work. He has participated in many interreligious dialogues and done many talks in the aims of promoting interfaith relations.

We, Buddhists, believe that religions should be used to support and help people, and not to create conflicts. Religions should not be used to separate us from other fellow human beings. Dr.S.N. Goenka, in one of his great talks, during the Millennium World Peace Summit of religious and spiritual leaders, mentioned that "religion is religion only when it unites. Religion is no more a religion when it divides." "Religion is not for dividing people; it is for uniting people."

Buddhism as a religion play a very important role to unite people if we truly follow the footsteps of the Buddha. The Universal Love or Compassionate Love (Metta) as taught by the Buddha is key to uniting all people in terms of insight, peace and mutual understanding. "Equality, brotherhood, tolerance, understanding, respect for others' views, respect for others' religions, all have their roots in Compassionate Love"⁶

Metta—if correctly learnt and practiced—is one of the best parts of Buddha's teaching that leads to interreligious understanding and interfaith

⁵Rahula, p4.

⁶ Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994, p20.

work. Buddhists are supposed to live by Metta and tolerance so that they are open-minded when it comes to interfaith relations.

Buddhists should not claim to be religious people only when they pray and perform religious services or ceremonies. If any Buddhist fails to exercise Metta toward themselves and others, including non-Buddhists, and use violence instead, they are not true Buddhist people. “Buddha tried to open our minds to understand things perfectly without developing fanatical religious beliefs and discrimination”⁷

There is no need to convert other people to Buddhism. The Buddha himself never encouraged his disciples to convert people to his teachings. He just advised them show what is right and what is wrong. Moreover, the Buddha and his followers “do not condemn the followers of other religions as sinners who are doomed to spend an eternity in hell”⁸

According to Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda (1994), there are good individuals in every religion and faith. So no one should say that good people exist only in his or her religion. With this in mind, good Buddhists should never act against people of different faiths, but they should respect and worship those worthy of respect—inside or outside of Buddhism alike. “Although we may not agree with certain religious points of view they hold,” Dr. K Sri Dhammananda continued, “if they are sincere in their efforts to serve humanity and uplift it, we must respect them for it.”

Conclusion

If properly understood and practiced, Buddhism can be one of the best religions working for interfaith relations. Many great Buddhists, now and then, worked and had been working to bring people together as brothers and sisters, neighbors and relatives. There is no single true Buddhist who understands the teachings of the Buddha in its reality who acts against other faiths. If there is one, he or she is acting against the teachings of Buddhism. He or she is not a true disciple of the Buddha because he or she acts against the Buddha’s wishes.

Religions, particularly Buddhism, should not be used to separate people, no matter what the reasons are. So long as persons declare themselves Buddhists they should never ever discriminate followers of other religions because there is no single part of the teachings of the Buddha that means to divide people based on races or beliefs, but his Dharma is for uniting all people. Buddha himself worked so hard to unite people in the time of divisions. He allowed people from all walks of life to enjoy his teaching. He advised his followers to respect people of other religions if those people

⁷ Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994, p15.

⁸ Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994, p26.

honestly work for the benefits of human beings. In his words, they are truly worthy of our respects and worship.

It is highly recommended that every Buddhist learns more about Buddhism and those who already have should put it into practice. There should be more unity among the different schools of Buddhism. Buddhism is not about Mahayana or Theravada; it is about unity. We might have different ceremonies, rites and rituals, because we have different cultures and traditions, but the teachings of the Buddha stay unchanged for us. Its aim is to help us live in the world guided by Metta and tolerance. If we truly respect the Buddha, we should also fulfill his wish by respecting other people of other religions. Hatred should not have its place in Buddhism. Love only should prevail.

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