

Buddhist Perspectives on Interfaith Relations

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Abstract

Religions should not be the 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 together to avoid misunderstanding among religions. This is when people, regardless of religions, work to promote interreligious relations and mutual understandings. 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. 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, Buddhist Perspectives

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 the remote parts of some countries, such as Cambodia and Thailand, are not very familiar with this word - let alone the concepts of the word. I myself - then was a four-year student - heard and understood the word and its concepts very shortly before I joint 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” is a complete trust, commonly used in religious context (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2013-2014 : 6).

Interfaith relation 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 religious backgrounds and beliefs in order to find more peace for all people as a whole. Interfaith relations occur when people from Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and many other faiths can live and work together without conflicts based on religious bias. Interfaith work is about a lot of things: peace and justice, community and friendship, conversation and action (Illinois Wesleyan University, 2013-2014 : 1).

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 relation is very

important for the peace and harmony in today world. Buddhism also shares a great deal of perspectives on the religious harmony and interfaith relations.

In this short article, I will seek to explain some basic perspectives from the Buddha's teachings related 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 Buddha (K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994 : 4). But the Buddha was not against any single religion. He did not provoke hatreds toward those with different beliefs than his. Instead, he felt so compassionate toward all people - his disciples and the followers of other religions equally alike. He treated them as a fellow human being, not his opposition. 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 the good religion. Instead of saying his religion was the best, he gave some remarkable points which could be the clues showing that Buddha himself was not against other religions. In fact, he was so 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 that "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 that. He then said "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 is not secular. It does not belong to any particular religion. We can see from here that the Buddha was so tolerant of others who hold different beliefs. This young man, in fact, was not a Buddhist, but the Buddha talked to him so gently. The Buddha did not discriminate against this young man just because of the fact that he was from other religions. Instead, he welcomed him so warmly, and the Lord talked to him just as he talked to his disciples.

The Buddha had worked very hard to promote religious 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 (Rahula, W., 1959 : 4). After some time of hard talks, Upala agreed that the Buddha's view was right, and his teacher's were 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 decisions. 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 old religious teacher, but the Lord sincerely requested him to respect and support that teacher as he used to.

Here, the Buddha valued 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 religions.

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

Buddhists and Interfaith Perspectives

The good Buddhists who truly follow the Buddha's teachings does not act against the followers of other religions. They do not see other religions 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 a few of them. In general, good Buddhists exercise their loving-kindness to all regardless of religions.

King Asoka, the great Buddhist Emperor of India in the third century, honored and supported all other religions in his empire. He believed and declared his edicts carved on a rock that "One should not honor only one's own religion and condemn the religions of others, but one should honor others' religions for this or that reason" (Rahula, W., 1959 : 4).

We can see here that the King was very open-minded toward 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 religions 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 renders service to the religions of others too. His belief is exactly correct and true. When people from different beliefs, respect each other and do good to each other, they are respected and practicing their own religions because all religions tell the followers to do good to all beings, regardless of beliefs. This is very necessary for the followers of the Buddha. They are supposed to have 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 regions should be used to support and help people, and not to create conflicts. Religions should be used to separate us from others fellow human being. Dr. S.N. Goenka, in one of his great talks, in the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and spiritual leaders, mentioned that “religion is religion only when it unites. Religion is no more 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 Loves 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” (K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994 : 20).

Metta - if correctly learnt and practiced - is one of the best parts of Buddha’s teaching that leads to interreligious understandings and interfaith work. Buddhists are supposed to live by Metta and tolerance so that they 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 Buddhists fail 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” (K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994 : 15).

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 religionists as sinners who are doomed to spend an eternity in hell” (K. Sri Dhammananda, 1994 : 26).

According to K. Sri Dhammananda 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 respects—inside of 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 a single true Buddhist who understands the teaching of the Buddha as its reality 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 Buddha's wishes.

Religions, particularly Buddhism, should not be used to separate people, no matter what the reasons are. So long as ones declare themselves Buddhists, they should never ever discriminate against the followers of other religions because there is no single part of the teaching of the Buddha means to divide people based on races or beliefs, but his Dharma is for uniting all people. Buddha himself worded so hard to unite people in the time of divisions. He allowed the people from walks of life to enjoy his teaching. He advised his followers to respect people in other religions if those people honestly work for the benefits of human beings. In his word, they are truly worthy of our respects and worship.

It is highly recommended that every Buddhist learn more about Buddhism and those who already have should put they have learned 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 teaching of the Buddha stays unchanged for us. Its aim is to help us live in the world led by Metta and tolerance. If we truly respect the Buddha, we should also fulfil his wish by respecting other people in other religions. Hatred should not have its place in Buddhism. Love only should prevail.

References

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