

# THE COMPATIBILITY OF BUDDHISM AND UNITARIANISM

by

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There are several belief systems that are ordinarily regarded as being religious which, when compared and contrasted with a religion such as what is known as conventional Christianity, are wholly or substantially naturalistic (non-supernaturalistic). They include Buddhism (in particular, Theravāda Buddhism), Confucianism, religious naturalism, religious humanism, much of modern day Judaism, much of modern day Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism, and New Thought.

As regards Buddhism and Confucianism, Humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont has written in *The Philosophy of Humanism* that “it seems most unlikely that either [Buddha or Confucius] believed in supernaturalism in the sense of a personal God and personal immortality”.

There are two main types or manifestations of Buddhism - Theravāda Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. As regards the former, which is the oldest form of Buddhism, the one "closest" to the Buddha's own teachings, and the dominant form of Buddhism in southeast Asia, there is, as R L Slater points out, “not only a complete absence of any belief in God, or any approach to such a belief, but a

complete absence of any experience or religious consciousness of transcendent Being". More particularly, as David Bentley-Taylor points out, the belief system "looks back to the body of doctrine approved at an important conference held in India not long after the founder's death". That body of doctrine comprises a set of important ethical teachings and standards.

American theologian, humanist and Unitarian minister Charles Francis Potter, in his book *The Faiths Men Live By*, has written, "This is the core of [Buddha's] message - right thinking will bring peace of mind." In other words, Buddhism, insofar as the individual human being is concerned, is essentially a path of personal transformation:

"Buddhism teaches us to look within ourselves for the inner peace and happiness we seek. By developing a more positive outlook, and in particular by deepening our wisdom and compassion, we can improve the quality of our life and gain great power to help others."

Buddhism, in its pure, naturalistic form, is essentially an education ... indeed, a process of education about ourselves and our environment, consisting of various methods and practices of self-culture (cf the American Transcendentalists). The teachings of the Buddha, when practiced, teach us to recognize ourselves - our thoughts, speech, actions ... and their various consequences. When we let go of our attractions, aversions and delusions, we are restored to our original and complete wisdom ... "the pure mind of our self-nature" (Ven Master Chin Kung).

On a more formal side Unitarian minister Potter has written:

"There is no record of the Buddha's ever praying or ever teaching his disciples to pray. The nearest to a prayer there is in Buddhism is the statement which must be made by a convert, which is called The Refuge, or The Buddhist Trinity [the *Tisarana*, also commonly rendered "The Three Refuges"]:

I take refuge in the Buddha.  
I take refuge in the Dharma.  
I take refuge in the Sangha.

The Dharma is the Teaching or Doctrine of Buddhism, and the Sangha is the brotherhood of the Believers."

It must, however, be kept in mind that the formulation, "I take refuge in the Buddha", refers to an undertaking to follow Buddha's instructions, that is, to walk in his steps [cf 1 Peter 2:21: "... Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps"]. The words do not, however, denote accepting Buddha as one's personal lord and savior, at least as understood in evangelical Christianity. There is, as R L Slater points out, a complete "absence of any belief in divine grace, as man is bidden to work out his own salvation, dependent on his own effort".

And what of the so-called supernatural? As regards traditional Buddhism, Humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz, in his book *Living Without Religion: Eupraxophy*, has written:

"One cannot find a doctrine of the supernatural in Buddhism, at least as understood in Western religion. There is no conception of God as a person, no cosmic plan, no idea of personal immortality or salvation. In the traditional sense Buddha was an atheist, for he rejected theism. ..."

Buddhism, at least as taught by its founder (who, by the way, did not claim to be divine and was quite agnostic as to the existence of God as traditionally understood), was and remains a non-theistic ethical system, notwithstanding the supposed existence of godlike beings in Mahāyāna Buddhism, of which there are many schools). Be that as it may, Buddhism is almost entirely devoid of faith and worship at least in the sense in which those words ordinarily are used. Its Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold Path and Ten Commandments (the latter so very different from those of Judaism and Christianity), along with the lists of the Four Intoxications and the Five Hindrances, constitute an entirely naturalistic code of ethical standards devoid of any references to God. Further, Buddhism lacks the mythology of a supernatural, miraculous religion and the doctrine of salvation by grace. Instead, Buddhism focuses on achieving moral equanimity in *this* life. For

the most part, Buddhism, at least in its oldest and most authentic forms and manifestations, is naturalistic and psychological in its orientation, teachings and outlook. Says Rodney King:

"Legendary miracles did develop later within Buddhism which ascribe miracles to Buddha, yet the original accounts are completely devoid of any miraculous occurrences. Miracles are incompatible with Buddha's philosophy. Buddhism affirms a naturalistic view of the universe. This may also explain the sky-rocketing interest in Buddhism ... it offers a type of spirituality without the religious baggage of faith, accountability and absolute truths."

Altogether different is Caodaoism, which is the third largest religion in Vietnam after Buddhism and Roman Catholicism. Caodaoism is a curious, idiosyncratic, highly syncretistic superstitious religion, or caricature of a religion, that uncomfortably combines elements of, among others, Buddhism, Roman Catholicism, Daoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Vietnamese indigenous belief systems (even throwing in Charlie Chaplin and Victor Hugo for good measure), and is nothing short of a travesty of traditional Buddhism as well as the other abovementioned belief systems. It has attracted the interest of some Westerners and has spread from Vietnam to many other countries including Australia. It's a pretty religion, but it's not Buddhism.

There is no concept in true Buddhism of "creation", let alone doctrine of special creation (as in Christianity), or, for that matter, any sense of there being a "Creator", whether personal or otherwise. Similar to certain belief systems such as Christian Science and New Thought, the religion embodies a rather extreme form of what is known as objective idealism. In that regard, Hsu Heng Wei, in *What is Buddhism? Theory and Practice*, writes:

"A well-known Buddhist saying 'Fundamentally uncreated is the mind but it exists through things' may be considered to be in line with Materialism."

The Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth do not postulate the existence of a supernatural order or level of reality as those words are understood in Western

religion and philosophy but are understood, rightly or wrongly, to be perfectly naturalistic in their operation. Bentley-Taylor makes the point that these doctrines are said to operate in naturalistic spheres of human activity and mentality:

"... Buddhism does not accept the theory of transmigration, for it rejects the idea of a soul existing in a body and thus forming the connecting link between successive incarnations. What lives on after death is simply Karma, the result of what has happened before, not some inward and invisible part of the individual. The true Buddhist doctrine is therefore rebirth without transmigration."

This is something that is rarely properly understood. Many people think that Buddhist and Hindu views on reincarnation are more-or-less the same, but that is not the case. There is no transmigration of souls according to Buddhism; the express denial of the existence of the soul is one of the principal claims of Buddhism. Nirvana is itself a natural state - one of liberation - the attainment of which is itself viewed as a natural evolutionary process. Bentley-Taylor writes:

"Nirvana is an ethical state, a condition which eliminates any future rebirth, the extinction of all craving, the final release from suffering. ... It is a state of mind in which Karma comes to an end. It is the cessation of becoming, for when a process is not continued it simply ceases. It is remainderlessness. ..."

Although accepted and generally regarded as a religion, Buddhism is more a moral philosophy and "a Way". Thus, the great British judge Lord Denning MR recognized that Buddhism was an "exceptional case" that needed to be treated as such as it did not otherwise come within the standard definition of 'religion'" (*R v Registrar General, ex parte Segerdal* [1970] 3 All ER 886 at 890). However, with the greatest respect, to treat what is reportedly the sixth largest of the world's religions in terms of followers as an "exception" to the general rule strains credulity and is otherwise unacceptable as it smacks of unfortunate overtones of Christian and western cultural supremacy and religious bias.

For my part, as a Unitarian Christian who has also formally embraced Buddhism as a way of life and rule for living, having taken the Three Refuges (see the

*Tisarana*, above) as well as the Five Precepts, I firmly believe that there is no incompatibility between Buddhism and *true* Christianity, the latter rightly being stripped of the many crude theological dogmas which, in my respectful opinion, were never part of the authentic teachings or mission of Jesus. Buddhism, as with progressive Christianity, is not a question of creed but of life. Buddhism is not a belief system or a ritual. As already mentioned, Buddhism is essentially an education. As such, followers of all religions, or none, can learn and cultivate this education of true wisdom.

*Becoming* a Buddhist is making a commitment to practice Buddhism by taking the Three refuges. *Being* a Buddhist is not a matter of accepting a particular belief system or certain doctrines or dogmas but of *practising* Buddhism on a daily basis from moment to moment. The teachings of the Buddha are something to *do*, not something to believe in. As a Buddhist Christian I am not asked to accept any article of faith but to try to live according to certain moral and ethical precepts which collectively comprise what some have referred to as the "parallel sayings" of both the Buddha and Jesus. Those precepts include conquering anger by non-anger, evil by good, and lying by truthfulness. In the words of the Venerable Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa Indapañño, "Christianity and Buddhism have more things in common than you ever knew, thought, or hoped."

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