

The Buddhist View of Inter-religious Dialogue

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I will cover three topics regarding the Buddhist view of inter-religious dialogue:

- (1) The historical Buddhist attitude toward other religions.
- (2) Doctrinal and practical basis for inter-religious dialogue.
- (3) My own view of the Buddhist attitude toward inter-religious dialogue today.

(1)

Religious debates were traditionally part of Hindu training in India. Participants in these debates had to explain and define their faiths to each other. The debate was conducted like a contest and the loser had to follow the victor's religious belief. The Buddha won many converts in this way (through debating), but he did not disparage the faith of others or force them to follow him after he had won.

In the *Uparisutra* we find the story of the student of Mahāvīra who was sent to meet the Buddha and debate *Karma* with him. He lost the debate and wanted to follow the Buddha, but the Buddha asked him to reconsider his own faith. He persisted and the second time the Buddha accepted him as a student but asked him to keep following his faith as before.

Whithin this open attitude, however, the Buddha was very critical of and discarded views unfavorable to the way to enlightenment. He proclaimed the *Dharma* as the way of de-

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liverance. King Ashoka of the third century B.C. in India was devoted to the Buddha and supported the *Sangha*. He sent missionaries to other parts of the country, but he also honored and supported all religions and promoted dialogue among them.

By honoring others one exalts one's own faith, and vice versa. Through concord one learns the *Dharma* accepted by others. Buddhist missionaries went to other lands in this spirit, and they accommodated themselves to the cultural milieu of each country. In Japan, Buddhism caused a struggle between the leading families who pledged allegiance to either Buddhism or Shintoism. However, Buddhism has peacefully spread throughout Asia.

(2)

In Buddhist doctrine the relativistic idea of recognizing truth in all religions stems from the doctrine of "dependent origination." Buddhism does not recognize any absolute independence from relative concepts. In Buddhism there is no idea of one God or special revelation. Buddhist thinking goes beyond the duality of absolute and relative into the experience of emptiness, suchness, and non-ego. Difference as it is is sameness and sameness as it is is difference. Buddhism takes the standpoint of no standpoint.

Liberal Christians admit the possibility of revelation in other faiths but believe that this is a general revelation and they, as Christians, experience a special revelation. The theology of Paul Tillich is a good example of what I am talking about here. However, in Buddhism every particular faith is relatively true; there exists no such exclusive criterion. Other

faiths are not seen as false or less pure or privileged. However, this is not indiscriminate syncretism, for every particular faith is also considered to be relatively false. In fact, this Buddhist attitude is a world-view and is applied to all reality, not just to religions. This attitude is enabled by the Buddhist's self-negation allowing him to make unbiased evaluations of other faiths.

Buddhism is not well-described by the term "tolerance," because this term implies self-affirmation. Buddhists can maintain a very critical attitude while at the same time not being exclusive. The Buddha encouraged students to examine his own words carefully. The result of this is a critical attitude combined with openness towards other religions.

(3)

The future of Buddhism in the field of inter-religious dialogue, as I see it today, includes an awakening to Truth through asking, knowing, seeing, exploring. In Buddhism doubt is not sinful; it is only ignorance which is sinful. The Truth to which one is awakened through this searching mind is non-ego or emptiness realized as reality or wisdom. Buddhism can contribute this awakenig spirit to the field of inter-religious dialogue because a commitment to Buddhism is not contradictory to openness.

In today's world there is indiscriminate acceptance of philosophies, religions, and ideologies due to a lack of this critical spirit. There is thus degeneration in Buddhism and a commitment to the *status quo*. In today's Japan, due to a lack of critical spirit, Buddhism has become uncreative and ultraconservative and has become confined within its sect framework iso-

lated from society.

The relationship of religions to political power and antireligious ideologies is the theme of the conference this week. Antireligious ideologies, including scientism, Marxism, and Nietzsche's nihilism, attack religion on an emotional and rational basis and are against the very existence of religion itself. These ideologies, therefore, should be taken as part of the general problem of religion versus antireligion.

In dealing with these questions and challenges from antireligious ideologies and political powers, each religion must break through its patterns to reveal its pure qualities. The questions "What is man?" and "What is religion?" must be asked anew in this time. We must critically examine our own and other religions and find deeper ways to meet this challenge.