

WHY WE SHOULD PRACTISE BUDDHISM

Before we begin to discuss why we should practise the Teachings of the Buddha, it will be useful to understand why the Buddha decided to teach a new religious way of life for gaining ultimate happiness in the first place. You may recall that the Buddha had initially hesitated to declare this doctrine because he saw how utterly confused people were about their existence and their condition and how completely different his method was from what they were used to. It was only when he reflected that there were some people ‘with little dust in their eyes’, that he decided to impart his noble and rational Dharma to mankind. He did this out of pure compassion and to relieve the sufferings of all beings.

The Buddha’s path to Enlightenment in his last birth began when he saw the four sights – the old man, the sick man, the corpse and the ascetic – which gave him a glimpse into the insight that suffering is caused by unsatisfactoriness. Once his mind was made up, he renounced the world and began his quest for the complete extinction of every kind of suffering. He noted that this suffering took many forms – social ills, discrimination, misconceptions. He also saw people trying to escape suffering by becoming slaves to religious practices like starvation and physical torture, under the misconception that by abusing the body, they could release the so-called soul. He also noted that on a social level enormous suffering was caused by the division of people into four castes. Again women were horribly discriminated against. Large sums of money were spent on meaningless rites and rituals causing the death of helpless animals. The future Buddha saw that all these had nothing to do with an intelligent understanding of the plight of humanity and he wanted to show the correct path for final salvation.

He wanted to introduce a noble way of life for human beings to practise by restoring their natural dignity. He declared that salvation must be gained through purification of the mind and gaining wisdom and not by inculcating blind faith or fear of gods and commandments.

At this point it is necessary to distinguish between the teaching of the Buddha, which we call the Dharma and the religion, Buddhism with its related activities which were organized by his followers in accordance with their traditions, customs and way of life. The Buddha had no intention of founding a religion for people to believe in. On many occasions he declared

that he was not interested in whether people honour him or not. In fact he encouraged his followers to deeply consider his teachings to decide whether they were valid or not. He did not condemn anyone who did not follow his order.

The Dharma which the Buddha realized and taught may be translated as the Noble Truth, because it shows us the reality of our existence and helps us lead a respectable harmless life to find liberation. Dharma is formed from the root 'Dhar' which means 'support' or 'hold up'. Therefore it means the absolute truth on which rests the working of the entire universe. A knowledge of this truth eradicates ignorance and therefore will help us to be free from fear and superstition. It frees us to work out our salvation. It prevents us from falling into unfortunate states of existence both in this world or the next where we can be born as animals, unhappy spirits such as hungry ghosts and so on. But do not forget, we need not wait to die to experience these states – even when we are alive as human we can display anger, hatred, greed, jealousy and descend into these levels. When we develop strong mental habits with these defilements as their base, we manifest them at death and are 'reborn' in these lower states. An understanding of these processes, which is Dharma, will prevent us from going to unfortunate states of suffering and from repeated birth and death. As you can see, Dharma has very little to do with 'religion' as a system of beliefs, rituals and priests. It is truly a way to train and purify the mind.

The real nature of the human mind is not explained clearly in any other religion. But the accurate interpretations of mental activities can be found in the Buddhist Abhidharma or higher Teachings. Modern psychologists are still in the dark about certain areas of the human mind. But they have admitted that when we compare modern psychology with the psychology which existed 2500 years ago in India, modern psychology is still in the infancy stage! The Buddha had explained clearly many things that people could not understand earlier. In fact, when we see the real nature of the human mind, we can understand why we are called 'manusya' (Sanskrit). 'Mana' means mind, and by extension 'manusya' means one who can develop, cultivate his or her mind up to the maximum level. A living being who uses the mind in a rational way is called 'manusya'. In the same way, Chinese philosophy uses the word 'humane'(ren), to describe those who have sympathy, kindness and compassion and honesty. If these qualities are absent in people, then we cannot regard them as real human beings. Western philosophy defines this word, as referring to those who have a sense of

reasoning. In fact, ‘Homo sapiens’ literally means thinking man. All other living beings have a mind but their minds are limited only to ensure their survival, to help them find food, shelter, for procreation and a little bit of pleasure, but they cannot extend their mind further than that. Even devas and Brahmas who are regarded as divine or supernatural beings too, have no intelligence as we have. They do not know what will happen to them after their death. They do not know how to prepare for their next existence; they have no such idea. The belief that becoming a deva or brahma should be the final goal of our existence, is rejected by the Buddha. As long as craving for existence in any living being exists, then that being *will* re-exist. We call that strong desire to exist *bhava tanha* (craving for existence). Therefore, devas and brahmas who have strong desires are also not free from rebirth but they do not know that. Human beings can understand that death is not the end of a life, but that existence again can take place. Wise human beings are therefore in a position to prepare for the next existence and ensure that it is not an unhappy one. This is where the religion becomes a useful aid. Humans are the only living beings who can understand that we have the power to control our own destiny. There is no other living being who is capable of conceiving a religion. Human beings were able to conceive and organize religion because of their intelligence. The usual belief is that religions were originated in heaven and were brought down to this earth by revelation, but Buddhism declares that religion originated on this earth in the minds of human beings and later reached heaven. Religion did not come down from heaven. In fact those deva realms (or heaven) are not really conducive to spiritual development because they are solely concerned with pleasure alone, and devas have no idea of the realities of impermanence and suffering. This explains why the future Buddha had to descend to earth from Tusita heaven where he was existing as a deva, to gain his enlightenment. A god, a deva or brahma cannot become a Buddha, only humans can develop their mind to that level of perfection because they are in a position to examine the nature of sufferings. Now we can understand that we humans have all the potential to cultivate our minds to reach the final goal, to see the end of all our physical and mental sufferings or unsatisfactoriness. It is due to a lack of understanding of this truth that some people try to ridicule the Buddha by saying the Buddha is not a god and ask, ‘Why do you worship him?’ ‘What can you gain from him?’ If we introduce the Buddha as a god, we lower the supremacy of his enlightenment.

UNSATISFACTORINESS

All of us experience unsatisfactoriness. How many times a day we experience unsatisfactoriness. That is what the Buddha has described as 'dukkha', which is not mere pain or suffering, although this is how we normally translate this word. We experience unsatisfactoriness. We can never be satisfied with whatever we gain because we want something else as soon as we get it. We want to give up something as soon as we gain it because it loses its attractiveness. We call this Impermanence. So throughout our lives we struggle to grasp at things, and we always experience unsatisfactoriness because we ourselves and the things we grasp are always changing. To be really happy we must overcome this human weakness and the struggle to realize why we are unhappy should be the aim in our life.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE BUDDHA

The example of the Buddha himself should be adequate to explain how we can progress along the path to purification. The training process of the bodhisattva before he became a Buddha was a long and difficult one. The Jataka stories recount some of the innumerable previous lives of the future Buddha where he underwent many trials in order to purify and perfect his mind. Even in his last birth as Prince Siddharta he had to undergo many trials before his Enlightenment. Even as a child, he observed one day how a lizard which was eating some ants was swallowed by a snake only to be picked up in its turn by a hawk. These chain of events impressed upon him the nature of suffering where beings prey upon each other for their survival. Then one day his cousin Devadatta wounded a swan which the prince nursed back to health, convincing him that Compassion was the antidote to cruelty which beings inflict upon others. He then came upon the famous four sights – the old man, the sick man, the dead man and the ascetic which brought home to him the great truth of Impermanence as the ultimate cause of suffering. This realization led further to his decision to turn his back on the world with its material comforts and to make the Great Renunciation.

RENUNCIATION

Many people today find it hard to accept Prince Siddharta's decision to leave his wife and newborn son and take up asceticism. This was not an unusual decision in the culture of India where it has always been held that the noblest path one can take is renunciation: to forgo the pleasures of the

flesh and seek spiritual perfection. It was a decision which brought honour to the family. Also we know that the prince had discussed this matter many times with his wife, although on that night before renunciation he refrained from waking her up and the baby. And we know that the princess understood and supported the decision saying that she understood his destiny. This was also in keeping with Indian tradition as we see in the Rama and Sita story where Sita faithfully supports her husband's decision to spend 14 years in the forest as an ascetic. Prince Siddharta's wife understood his great calling to save all beings and it would have been selfishness on her part to restrain him from his mission, not the other way round.

After the great renunciation he embarked on a course of tremendous austerities which he found fruitless and not leading to peace of mind. He came to see that when the body is tortured by severe fasting and other deprivations, the mind cannot be at ease to freely ponder on things as they really are. He also knew that as a prince his life of excessive luxury was not only unprofitable but ignoble. He therefore embarked on the Middle Path between luxury and austerity and found the right formula for cultivating the mind which eventually led to his Perfect Enlightenment.

BUDDHISM IN CHINA

Buddhism has long been an important force in shaping the cultures of the people in Asia. For example, why did the Chinese people choose Buddhism, rather than the other religions in India, such as Brahmanism or Jainism? They had their own beliefs in China, but they were not satisfied. They wanted to find out the answers to many questions about existence but they could not find them in the religions prevalent in China at that time. They therefore underwent incredible pain and difficulties to reach India by crossing treacherous rivers, jungles and deserts. It took a long period for them to reach India. However they had the courage to stay there for several years, to study Buddhism. This is because when they observed carefully, they knew that Buddhism was a universal religion. They knew it is easy to practise Buddhism, because this religion did not make it necessary for them to change their Chinese way of life, which had been handed down by their ancestors over thousands of years. Appreciating this, they chose Buddhism. After Buddhism was introduced in China, it developed to such an extent that during Emperor Ming Ti's period, Buddhism was declared as a state religion in China. The Chinese noticed that the Buddha did not discourage people from continuing to respect their own cultures and traditions, if they were

meaningful. So they accepted Buddhism and practised it while upholding their Chinese culture. The result was a new religious culture based on the mixture of Chinese and Buddhist concepts. Today it is known as Chinese Buddhism. Buddhism would never have become a world religion if the Chinese had not accepted Buddhism. Once it took hold in China, it did not remain there. The Chinese introduced Buddhism to Korea, and Korea introduced it to Japan, acting as a great civilizing force.

BUDDHISM IN MALAYSIA

Let us now look at Malaysia. Malaysia was a Buddhist country up to the 14th century, when the Sri Vijaya empire was strong in Indonesia. Then the Sultan of Malacca embraced Islam. After that the whole country became a Muslim country. For 600 years, even the name of Buddhism had disappeared from the country. However when the Chinese migrated here at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the Buddhist way of life was again introduced in Malaysia. Later Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar gave their full support to promote Buddhism in Malaysia. Today 18% of the population follows Buddhism here making it the second major religion. Buddhism was revived in Malaysia because of the Chinese. They must remember that it was their ancestors who were responsible for bringing this noble religion back and therefore it is the bounden duty of the present generation to maintain such a noble religious way of life. It is a religion which is closely bound up with their culture and their inner being. Unfortunately today, they surrender this religion for material gains and for certain other emotional or irrational reasons. Today in the name of conversion and salvation, some religionists buy people. They are willing to pay any amount and provide all the material things to them. Buddhists should not surrender this noble religion for the sake of material gain. After conversion, the first lesson that the leaders of these religions introduce is hatred by forcing the new converts to destroy the respected religious objects that they had venerated, and which their ancestors had venerated for generations. Throughout its entire history there is no record of Buddhists carrying out this kind of destruction of religious objects.

THE RELIGION THAT INTELLECTUALS CAN APPRECIATE

Buddhism is such a sublime religion, that it is appreciated by intellectuals, scientists, great thinkers, philosophers, rationalists, and even free-thinkers, all over the world. The Buddha says, 'The dharma that I

preach can be understood only by those who know how to think.’ Intellectually and spiritually weak people do not know how to appreciate this dharma. Intellectual people who have the intelligence to use their minds clearly, know how to appreciate this dharma as a universal law.

Scientists have discovered so many things over the last 100 years, and many of their discoveries have challenged the teaching of some religions. But scientists cannot discover anything which contradicts the teaching of the Buddha. The more they discover about the mysteries of the universe, the nearer they come to the Buddha. H. G. Wells, a world historian says in one of his books, ‘When we study our holy book we are told that god created this world six thousand years ago. When we study geology, we can understand it has taken billions of years for this earth to cool down and settle before life became possible. Therefore how can we believe what is written in our holy book?’

ATTITUDE OF SOME OTHER RELIGIONS

Some religious authorities advise their followers not to listen to the religious talks of others, not to read other religious books, and not to step into places of worship of other religions. They threaten that if they do, their god will get angry and punish them. This is the way they blindfold their followers and hold them in fear and ignorance. Why do they advise in this manner? If people are allowed to listen to other religious talks, read other religious books, visit some other places of worship, these leaders fear that the beliefs which they preach may be thrown out when people open their minds to listen to others. Therefore, the followers are not allowed to open their minds but hold on to their own beliefs blindly. A strong man does not fear his enemies.

A RATIONAL RELIGIOUS WAY OF LIFE

On the other hand, the Buddha encouraged his followers to study, to observe how people practise their different religions. In the West, a new name is given to Buddhism: ‘religion of freedom and reason’ since Buddhists do not depend on gods for their salvation but are encouraged to purify and develop their own minds. Buddhism is also described as a ‘do it yourself religion’. Obviously, Buddhism is a religion for the spiritually mature. People in the west say they cannot find these two qualities in any other religion but only in Buddhism. The Buddha wanted to release us from

religious slavery, by introducing a rational religion for us to practise by giving due credit to our human intelligence, by maintaining our human dignity. With Buddhism we can cultivate our human values without any commandments, religious laws, religious punishments.

When we catch wild animals, lions, tigers, we tame them by beating and creating fear in them. After that they follow us, they listen to us, but they have no sense of reasoning. If they are allowed to return to their natural state, their animal instincts return and they may even attack their masters. Because of fear they remain without harming others. Many of those who follow religious laws can be compared to those creatures who do not harm others because of fear and punishment. The Buddha was never afraid of other religions. He was ready to recognize the truth if it was found in any teachings. In fact he encouraged his followers to respect other teachers. One day, a very rich man who was not a Buddhist came to see the Buddha and told him that he wanted to become a Buddhist. He said, 'I have heard your teaching is very good, therefore I have decided to become a Buddhist.' 'Have you heard my teaching?' the Buddha asked. He replied, 'no!' 'Do you know whether you can practise my teaching?' He said 'no!' 'That is not the way to embrace a religion!' said the Buddha. 'First, you must observe whether you can practise this new religion.' Then this man said, 'I think this advice itself is more than enough for me to understand the nature of your teaching. If I approach another religious teacher, he would at once have pounced on me and announced this to the others. Instead, you advised me to wait, study, observe and decide carefully. I am satisfied. Now I am convinced. I want to be a Buddhist!' Then he asked another question, 'I have been supporting the priests of my former religion, now as a Buddhist, can I support them?' The Buddha said, 'You can support any living being, it is a meritorious deed.' See how different this attitude is from that of some religions we find today. When followers of our religion ask for some donation from the followers of another religion, they say, 'Sorry we cannot give donations to another religion, it is against our religion; and it is a sin.' In contrast to this attitude it is a fact that the largest number of donors to non-Buddhist charitable organizations in Malaysia are Buddhists! This is just one reason why intelligent people say Buddhism is a religion of freedom and reason.

BUDDHISM AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY

All over the world, people are struggling to adopt family planning, and some religions object to it. They say that children are a gift of god and if god gives, we must accept. Why is it necessary to drag religion into this family planning problem? Religion has nothing to do with this social activity. If we depend on our holy books for everything without using our commonsense, we may get into trouble. Let me tell you a story to illustrate this. There was a religious teacher who had a few thousand followers. He was very strict and insisted that his word was law. He had written down all the instructions in his holy book and he warned his followers not to do anything without referring to his holy book. One day when this guru and the followers were crossing a narrow bridge, the guru slipped and fell down into the river. The followers remembered the instructions and wanted to read the holy book to determine what he had decreed and what to do when the guru fell into the river. The guru was shouting for help, but the followers said, "Wait, wait, we want to see what you have written in our holy book about a situation like this." Of course the guru drowned, before they found the instruction.

The same thing may happen to us if we blindly depend on our holy books for everything. People must have the freedom to carry on their family affairs according to their wishes and what is most beneficial to society according to their convenience. They will not harm anybody by doing that. Holy books were written a long time ago and simply cannot have answers to every problem we face today. Some religious leaders of course conveniently re-interpret their books to keep pace with modern scientific discoveries which they can no longer deny: evolution, origin of the world, the position of women, the forgiveness of sins, the inequalities among people. Buddhism of course has no such problem because the Buddha never uttered anything which cannot be verified by science today.

One of the reasons why Buddhism is spreading among intelligent people today is that the Buddha's methods are the methods employed by science to discover facts about ourselves. Just like the Buddha, scientists observe their surroundings impartially in an attempt to see things as they really are (*Yathabhuta*). Like the Buddha, scientists are not awed or influenced by previously held beliefs, no matter how highly respected they are. The Buddha also never proclaimed anything which could not be accepted by reason and experiment. He invited all followers to come and see for themselves (*ehipassiko*) and not simply believe out of blind faith.

Buddhists are not blinded by emotional fervour and religious ecstasy, but observe all phenomena calmly and rationally. Buddhism does not encourage people to be religious fanatics, either to discriminate against or condemn other existing religions. The first requirement to practise Buddhism is not Faith, but Understanding. And like a scientific discovery, anyone is free to question the validity of what is stated. As a result, even 25 centuries later, Buddhists have no problems verifying the latest discoveries of science. And we are not inventing these claims either. We have the exact words of the Buddha in well known suttras like Kalama Sutta to prove that we are not making unjustified claims on his behalf today. Buddhists do not need to rewrite the teaching of the Buddha when challenged by science. However, it must be emphasized that we cannot simply equate Buddhism and science. Buddhism transcends science, because it gives a moral dimension to our existence. Buddhism stresses the need for emotions like compassion and kindness, for concern to ease the sufferings of others, to live blameless lives - all these are beyond the immediate concerns of science. Just to give two examples, Buddhists cannot condone animal slaughter and abortion, no matter how much scientists can argue for their need in modern society.

The teachings of the Buddha clearly tell us about the vastness of the universe. The latest development by scientists is cloning. Some religious leaders have approached their governments to ban cloning. What is the Buddhist opinion about cloning? Buddhism always encourages human beings to use their intelligence and it never tries to suppress their discoveries. If scientists do something extraordinary and it is not immoral we should let them go ahead with their research. If scientists can do the work of god, then there is no reason for human beings to surrender to god. And in any case no scientist can go against the natural order of things which the Buddha called the Dharma. So scientists cannot go beyond this Dharma. For example, no scientist can make the sun and the moon shine at the same time. As Buddhists there is no reason for us to object to their discoveries. Scientists do not depend on god or religion to discover anything. They use their independent intelligence to work with nature. We must have freedom to understand things properly. The Buddha treated us as human beings, who have minds capable of intelligent thoughts. Krishna Moorthy, a very highly respected philosopher who did not profess any religion has said that those who do not know how to think, borrow ideas from others and are therefore second-class human beings. Those who have minds must think and try to understand things rationally without depending on mythologies and blind

faith. The Buddha wanted to pave the way for us to think and through this understanding, we discover what to do and what not to do. The Buddha wanted to teach us how to think and understand through our experiences and the way to do it is to study, practise and experience, not to believe blindly.

HUMANISM AND RELIGION

When human beings first considered their existence, there was no religion at that time. Through experience, they realized the danger of cruelty, anger, jealousy and so on; although these are natural characteristics. On the other hand, they realized the importance of compassion, sympathy, generosity, harmony, patience, and tolerance. These characteristics were not given by god or devil, but were the natural products of the interaction of our five senses. When they interact, the sixth sense, mind, arises. Then through experience, our ancestors understood the danger of negative behaviour and the importance of positive behaviour. They developed humanism instead of religion: to live in harmony with their fellow-beings with understanding, cooperation, practicing tolerance and abstaining from evil, immoral and wicked things. That is 'humanism'. That is how they have illustrated the concept of heaven and hell extending their present experience of peace, pleasure and endless suffering. When they developed these good qualities, according to their knowledge at that time; they also realized that there is a universal energy which goes through every kind of existence. Those who arrived at this knowledge in India long before the Buddha's time called it Shakti and started to worship it. Because of that, they are called Shakti worshippers. After worshipping Shakti for a long period, they personified that energy and worshipped it as a 'god'. A well-known philosopher in America, Professor Whitehead, has declared that first, man created god and later, god created man. The concept of god was first created in the human mind and not the other way round. Later developments personified and gave it human characteristics. This is why the gods of many religions are often portrayed as being jealous, vengeful, destructive and easily flattered, although they are also described as fatherly, lovingly, forgiving and just.

THE UNPREDICTABLE HUMAN MIND

Three monks went out for meditation, and made an agreement not to talk under any circumstances until they attained some sort of spiritual development or sainthood. Then they started to meditate. While they were meditating, one of them suddenly said that he had forgotten to close the door

of his room and did not know what was happening there. Then the other monk said, 'We made an agreement not to talk, how can you talk like this,' and the third monk said smugly, 'Actually I never talk about this kind of minor thing. Why can't you two be silent like me?' This is the nature of the human mind. No matter what we decide to do, sooner or later we come back to our natural character and habit. That is why it is difficult to make up one's mind to do or not to do certain things. To teach good things, we have to send our children to school, college, university, and even give them private tuition. But they can learn all the bad things very easily without tuition or going to school: free of charge! Now in modern society, people experience difficulties to maintain human dignity but their animal nature is easily aroused in the mind. The way people behave today, the way they dress and what they do make them forget to maintain their human values and discipline. In the past, people maintained their human dignity by following their culture, way of life: they practised peace, harmony, unity and understanding. Today when we read the daily newspaper, we can see nearly 90% of news items are shameful, cruel, wicked, immoral, with violence and bloodshed e.g. how a six year old boy can shoot another student in school. They learn these wicked things from the mass media especially television. Children like to imitate things what adults do, especially what they see on television. But we have to be fair. The information that we get from the media has been very useful in many ways and it has shown us how we can get the best out of our lives. However, unscrupulous, irreligious people exploit our weakness and glorify our worst traits. This is what we must fight against, not the media as such.

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE

There is an alarming and widespread misconception among a very large number of Buddhists that it is not the responsibility of parents to ensure that their children learn the noble teachings and remain as Buddhists. They often are very proud to announce that they give their children the freedom to choose their religion even when they are very young. This is an attitude which is very wrong. The Buddha laid great emphasis on one of the greatest of unskillful actions, which is to believe in false views. Also if one who is responsible, like a parent, allows others to fall into wrong views, he or she is morally wrong and must pay the price. The Buddha very clearly declared that parents have a great responsibility towards their children to see that they are not led astray from the correct path and train them in the way of the elders.

These parents mistakenly think that freedom of choice means ignoring their spiritual responsibility towards their children. They can even be accused of trying to find excuses for their laziness, because the task of bringing up children according to the noble teachings is by no means easy, requiring great sacrifices. They wash their hands and hide behind the false notion that Buddhism allows people to follow all kinds of irrational beliefs. Immature children, especially adolescents are easily swayed by empty promises. We must guard against this for their own sake by guiding (not controlling) their minds to find ultimate happiness. The Buddha spent forty-five years exploring the wrong views of no less than sixty-two different religious systems. Never at anytime did the Buddha say it was RIGHT to follow such beliefs. What the Buddha did say was that it is utterly wrong to entice innocent minds into erroneous belief by promises which cannot be validated by investigation. But of course he did not allow his followers to burn or drown anyone who did not believe him. This freedom is very different from saying that the Buddha allowed everyone to go to the devil in his own ways!

The Buddha's Teaching clearly shows how one who has false beliefs will go on suffering in Samsara for endless periods of time. The Buddha also teaches that we are extremely fortunate to be born in a situation where we can learn the Dharma and walk the path that leads to final salvation. Children born to us expect to be given every opportunity to become good, understanding Buddhists. If we fail to grab this rare opportunity to benefit from the teachings and inculcate these teachings in our children, we are failing in our responsibility – like the monkey who threw away a ruby because he did not realize its worth. Also, as I explained earlier, this noble religion has become a vital part of our cultures in Asia and it has moulded our psyche in very subtle ways. If we do not ourselves understand these beautiful cultures because we are too lazy to learn and then blindly accept a more glamorous, and shiny but empty bubble we will have to pay the price in the loss of our children and the sense of our well-being. We can also ask why we were born as Buddhists if the original intention was to make us change our minds anyway. Would not that indicate someone is admitting a mistake in making us be born Buddhists?

This of course is not to frighten you and threaten you with hell and damnation if you dare to use your mind. Certainly we do not create fear in you by saying that if your children listen to the teachings of the other religions, or eat food at their festivals or touch their books, they will go to

eternal hell! Buddhists are free to explore the truth in other religions. No, it is simply to lay before you the reality of life. As parents you must learn the Dharma and understand your culture and make sure your children are also fully instructed about it. If, after you have done your duty, they chose to find comfort in another religion, then let them. This is what freedom means. Is it too much to ask?

RELIGION AND FREE-THINKERS

Today, religion is used only for praying and worshipping and gaining converts but not in actions which cultivate the mind. We cannot become religious people simply by praying or worshipping. All our cruel, wicked, harmful, dangerous thoughts dominate our minds constantly. Blind faith in rituals and prayer alone cannot purify the mind. There are many free-thinkers in this world, who do not believe in god, heaven, hell, karma, rebirth, and soul. These are the ingredients of religions and these people do not subscribe to them. Arthur C Clarke, Carl Sagan, G. Bernard Shaw, Krisna Moorthy, Bertrand Russell, just to name a few, all rejected traditional religion, but they were good people. They did not behave like barbarians. In fact some of those who do not accept religions are far better than those who claim to wear religious labels. Knowing that certain things are harmful, they avoid them. Knowing the power of compassion, they develop their sympathy, unity and kindness and do something to relieve the suffering of their fellow-beings not by expecting a reward from god, not to have the better rebirth after their death, but through understanding the essential unity of all beings. We can say that they are more religious minded and they uphold religious principles although they do not carry religious labels.

WHO IS CLOSE TO THE BUDDHA?

The Buddha did not want to introduce a religion just for people to come and worship or pray. He said, 'The disciples who follow me by holding my hand or my robe are not close to me, if their minds are not pure. There may be some disciples far away from me, who have never even seen me, but if they follow my advice and maintain purity in their mind, they are close to me.' This is the Buddha's attitude. He did not want to frighten people by creating fear, or demanding total surrender to his power. He advised us to respect those who are worthy of respect, irrespective of their religions or race, even those who do not claim to belong to any religion. If

we think that they are worthy of respect, we can respect them. The point here is that we must never try to introduce a religion by threatening and discriminating against others.

DISCRIMINATION AND PUNISHMENT

We know from the news we read everyday that perhaps the most discriminated against class of beings are women. Not only at home, but in the workplace; they are discriminated against very badly. Even in religion, women have to fight hard to be treated with respect as human beings. For example, women have been prohibited to enter into a place of worship in many religions. The Buddha was the first religious teacher who opened the gates for women to enter into the holy order as fully-fledged nuns to perform religious duties. Here we can understand what sort of freedom the Buddha had given to humanity without any discrimination. We follow our religion through our understanding of the true nature of all things. Buddhism does not even discriminate against so-called criminals. The Buddha knew by merely punishing people, we cannot change their minds. To change wicked people, punishment is not the solution. Like animals trained for the circus, convicts in prison keep quiet because they are powerless to do anything but when they get freedom again they will go back to the same normal way of life because no attempt was made to change their minds. The Buddha's method to convert criminals is to train them to effect a change in their minds. This is done not by punishing but by training the mind to observe moral discipline. We know all of us make mistakes. We should not try to overlook the problem by saying there is nothing wrong. Those who take precepts admit they are subject to make mistakes. Therefore they train themselves not to commit such evil deeds again. That is the real meaning of observance of precepts. This is the method introduced by the Buddha, without any punishment. Recently there was a news report that some Indian jails had started meditation programs and found a marked improvement in the behaviour of the inmates as a result ("Nirvana behind Bars" Newsweek Sept 18, 2000).

PUNISH THE MIND

Again, having seen how people torture their physical bodies as punishment for their wrongdoings, the Buddha said the physical body is not responsible for any mistakes that people commit; body cannot do anything, it is the mind that uses the body as a tool to get whatever it wants, so by

torturing our body we cannot get rid of the bad effects of bad deeds. The Buddha said, 'If we want to punish anything at all, then we must punish our mind, not the body. How can we punish the mind? When we are jealous and realize this jealousy is bad, we must try to control jealousy. When we are angry and we realize this anger can create a lot of violence, bloodshed, disturbances, we try to suppress anger. This is the way to punish the mind, to train the mind not by force, but through understanding and not giving in to all its demands. We must be masters of our minds, we must never allow the mind to control our actions. We have to maintain purity in the mind.' Otherwise, at home or in the society or the place where we work, we will generate anger, jealousy, enmity, fear and insecurity to disturb not only ourselves but others as well. We train ourselves by observing precepts. This will become habit. That is why the Buddha started his mission by training his followers in sila - the training rules or precepts.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to say that people can find an extraordinary truth in any other religion which they cannot find in the teaching of the Buddha.