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BUDDHIST ATTITUDE TO LIFE*

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I am extermely happy to be given the opportunity to come and share with you the contribution Buddhism could make to better the well being of human society. Tonight we have come together to discuss the benefits of sincere sharing of good things we value in our society in general and particularly religion. Those of us who believe in one or another religion have seen the benefits of religious practices if and when we practise them properly ourselves. We have also seen the danger and suffering which come out of direct misuse of religious beliefs, power and religious fanaticism. The benefit or harm caused by religion in everyday life is not in the merit or demerit of the religions. It is entirely dependent on the behaviours of the people who profess themselves to be religious. Since the problems of the world are created by human beings they can only be corrected by human beings, by properly following the fundamental principles of human values, taught and practised by wise men and women of the world. Let us not be in the illusion that there were only one or few such wise people who came as saviours of the world. We must credit ourselves and thank others for the good things we enjoy in life and be responsible for the bad things we experience. According to Buddhism, Religion or "the Dharma" is no more than a raft or a path for people who wish to journey on it. If we have an accident on the road it is not the road's fault and if we travel well, we do not thank the road. However if we stand in the middle of the road and tell other people that they do not know how to walk, that is not just an accident, it is sheer arrogance and ignorance.

I have come here to share with you the Buddhist perspective and how its fundamental ideas and practices can benefit individuals and our society at large. Buddhism and its teachings respects all other religions and in fact, in Buddhism, it is a transgression to speak ill of anybody or a group of people or their philosophical or religious ideas. Condemning other people or their religion is considered non-religious conduct and is an idle-talk which is one of the ten non-virtues deeds one must abandone. There is no devil outside other than one's own inability to accept and respect other religions. There is no external god other than the kindness and compassion that can flow through us to other living beings. A mother dog who shows her kindness to her puppy is a much better example of compassion foe one to emulate than propagating teachings which discriminate against colour, race, religion or gender. If one religion cannot tolerate another how can it teach to tolerate anything in this world? Religious intolerance and narrow-mindedness among Church and religious leaders have let down many of their adherents who call themselves "free thinkers". These are not the benefits of religious practice but the failure to understand and practise religion. Over the years I have met many people who wish to be identified as "free thinkers" rather than belonging to any religious denomination. Many regard religion as that which narrows their thinking and limits their freedom to reason. Many modern thinkers, who have otherwise distanced

themselves from strict religious dogma have become attracted to the Buddhist way of life and its powerful ideas, have regarded Buddhism as a way of life rather than a religion. Many Australians I have known, who consider themselves as Buddhists have become interested in Buddhism and have adopted its non-pressured approach to life, mainly because they do not have to believe in things they have not examined and experienced themselves. They are taught to think for themselves rather than have a blind faith in something and are not even allowed to think of it logically. They are encouraged to find a safe way for themselves rather than accept the one and only ready-made highway. There is no one highway to enlightenment, but there are different footsteps of past masters we can follow if we wish. Learn from everybody and every circumstance and take what it means most to you, but let us not be over-ambitious and try to make a highway to lead everyone. This is how the seeds of religious fanaticism are planted.

Several years ago there was a big inter-religious conference in London which was represented by all major religions. Buddhism was represented by a Sri Lankan monk. The conference was held in a beautiful Church and most of those attending were Christians. All the speakers sat on the stage and the Sri Lankan monk who was the smallest in physical size was asked to speak first. The first remark he made was nothing but a few minutes of total silence and the people in the audience thought he was not going to say anything and the Master of the Ceremony acted rather anxiously. Then the monk smiled towards the Master of the ceremony and nodded as if he was going to say something after all and then he said: "I am sorry, Ladies and Gentlemen, there is no God".

Well, I am not going to repeat it here but such comments do raise questions as to what Buddhism is all about and the role of Buddha for Buddhists. To be frank Buddha was a great critic of the idea of creation of the world by some supreme God-Head and the idea of the original sin and eternal heaven and hell. To the Buddha, most important thing was "now", the present moment and how we go from here rather than what happened in the past and what might or will happen in the future. Past is gone and future is not yet due except what we are creating now. He did this not out of believing in some theory but examining it for himself through analysis and rationality.

Buddha came up with four fundamental principles which he thought was universal to all human problems. Even to his most faithful disciples, the Buddha after his enlightenment, warned of the danger of "blind faith" and asked them not to believe everything what he said just because he taught them. He emphasised the importance of individuals to test and examine the authenticity of his teaching through personal experience, not through mere belief.

These four principles are called the four Noble Truths. The first is called the Truth of Suffering (Dukkha Satya). When people face suffering in their lives, the first thing they do is deny it, reject it and worst of all they try to avoid it. This he said was the obvious reason why we suffer in life, because we fail to see the truth, the meaning and its purpose of suffering. Although nobody desires suffering, they always get it, not because of the suffering itself, but because they fail to apply the correct antidote to the problem. He explained that people fail to apply the antidotes to their suffering, not because they do not want to but because they do not know the causes of the suffering. We think that the cause of our problem is something or someone outside us and this, he says "is barking up the wrong tree" as the saying goes. We must remember that suffering is a mental phenomenon and it can only be changed or eliminated by correct perception and transformation of our mental attitude. For instance if a person called John loves his friend Barry, and Barry has become very fond of Chris, who John dislikes, John

will be upset. This experience of upset, John believes is due to the behaviour of his friend Barry who has become fond of Chris. But if we examine it carefully, the cause of upset is largely due to John's own dislike, resentment and hatred towards Chris, rather than the relationship of Barry and Chris. If friendship is to be admired and desired, then one must be able to rejoice in other's friendship. That which is causing John to be upset is because of his feeling of insecurity and jealousy provoked by his own anger which he had not dealt with effectively in the past.

Let me elaborate this from the point of view of the importance of solving a problem at hand rather than of the distant past. If a man is shot by an arrow into his eyes, what should he do? Most people fail to remove the arrow struck in their eyes but instead waste time trying to apprehend and convict the accused. They are more interested to find out what happened before the arrow struck in the eye than to remove the arrow from the eyes. If the hurt is caused by the arrow in the eye, then obviously the arrow must be removed first. But we don't. We want to find out the beginning of the problem how it all started from scratch, i.e. "the creation". The spillover of this way of dealing with suffering is so epidemic and extremely hard to overcome. We deny and disapprove the hurt that we have already experienced but attempt to bring similar if not heavier hurt upon someone else, whether proven guilty or innocent. Blaming the past and the way we were treated in our childhood, by our parents does not address the problem at hand but makes the individual feel more resentful towards their past to the extent of developing self-hatred.

This takes us to the second Truth, the truth of the origin of the suffering. In Buddhism, the basic ignorance, greed and hatred in our minds are called "the three poisons". The benefits of religious practice can only be appreciated if individuals take full responsibility for their own poisons of the mind. The events of the past are not happening now, except by oneself playing it back in one's own mind. We can see how our mental problems are created from small factors. To reduce or eliminate suffering caused by one's own poisons of the mind, one must not see them as bad or eternally evil. People who do not know anything about poison become its victims. There are also large numbers of people who know the danger of the poisons of the mind but they suppress them without becoming able to detoxify them. Familiarity and undertsanding of this second truth is crucial to be able to do something about the upset which I referred to earlier. When we become aware that all human beings are victims of their own poisons of the mind, we have no time to become angry at the other person, but instead we feel empathy for the other person. This feeling of empathy brings ourselves to the same level as the other person and become more connected. By doing this we will not dwell in our own misery to deepen and enlarge it, but it sharpens one's focus on the other person's needs. If the cause of the hurt is the event of the past, it has already gone and is not happening now except oneself playing it back in one's own mind as if it was unforgettable. The moment we express our feelings and care for the other person, we will discover that he is in a similar if not worse mental state than we were. There will be an instant cure of the hurt that one has been experiencing out of misunderstanding. This changes the mental climate of anger into compassion and one will feel powerful to bring this change in one's mind without feeling powerless and hopeless. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that anger does not help us to solve the problem at hand, but robs us of our sleep, appetite and make us unable to appreciate the good things we have in life.

Compassion is taught in all religions but compassion without wisdom is likened in Buddhism to a bird with only one wing. While we all believe in compassion and its virtues, we mustn't use anything to impose upon

others in the name of compassion. If someone does not want our compassion, we must have the wisdom to accept the rejection of our compassion but at the same time not to be discouraged by such experiences. This raises the importance and need of balance and moderation in whatever we do in our lives, be it religious, compassionate or otherwise. If we go into extremes, religion can bring more suffering than it can benefit the world, as we all know. There are certain things we should not be too certain about. So let the law of cause and effect take its own course of reality. Some things we just have to accept. They will change in their own time for nothing is permanent in the world.

No matter how hurtful it may have been, it will pass or it mustn't have happened at all. So do not dwell on the past whether good or bad for it may obscure the good things which surrounds you now. The ability to maintain the mind in a free and accepting state is an art of happiness, joy and love. This is called the truth of the path, the third noble truth. It is also the path known as "The Middle Way (Madyam marga). This comprises of eight fold paths:

1. Right View: All things are in a state of dissatisfaction, whether you are young or old, have a partner or do not have a partner, or you have a job or do not have a job and so forth. Even if you obtain something you desire, it will never remain the same as all things are impermanent. If we wish things were permanent instead, you are asking for more trouble. If you are enjoying this meeting, that is because it was not here before and it will soon be over. If we sit here longer than it is comfortable, we will be in heaps of trouble, so we must move on. Reflection on the law of impermanence can resuscitate you when you are short of breath in certain problems of life and help to cultivate right view.

2. Right Thought: Through the correct attitude that things are not as real, satisfactory and durable as it appears or we want them to be, it will enable us to let go of things so we can become more flexible and less rigid and thus experience less stress. This helps us to sort out the thoughts and to get rid of certain thoughts which are harmful to dwell on. Certain thoughts such as kindness, impermanence and compassion towards other living beings can become a very powerful way of directing one's energy. Lots of the sufferings come from one's selfishness and the inability to think of positive things. Therefore it is important to choose the right things to think about. We see and hear what is in our mind.

3. Right Concentration: This way we will sort out the priorities in our lives and we will not waste time on trivial matters. There will be a sense of focus and discipline in life which will inject much needed motivation to live and help others rather than cherish for one's own welfare. This requires the adoption of a practice of meditation which one should learn from qualified teachers; not from books or people who have not invested devotion and faith in teachers, and lineage in which such teachings are kept, but teach from books without any experience and authority. Like a camera, one's mind has to be carefully focussed through attentive concentrated meditation to see the clear picture of reality as it is. If the camera of mind is out of focus, then our mental lens will project the incompetence of the cameraman who may in turn blame the object for being too close or far. His picture will be unclear if any.

4. Right Action: One will have the ability to restrain one's senses (particularly when things are going into extremes) and refrain from inflicting lots of unnecessary suffering by sheer carelessness and indulgence. By conserving all the physical energy one will carefully

utilise them to benefit others but not to cause any injury to their life, health, property and relationship. A person practising right action, who is able to give so much to others enjoy good health and will be full of energy. He will not feel worn out or exhausted.

5. Right Speech: Exercising restraint over one's physical energy will enable one to conserve one's energy. So much suffering in our lives are created by our mouth's Karma. So if we understand the meaning of right speech we should watch out for our mouth. Go for a short retreat and see how much peace there is in silence and see how much garbage we talk every day. Gain some power over your speech so that no hurtful words will slip out of your mouth. Say what is good for the many and that which is only truthful and helpful. When you do this, you will hear both praise and blame as the echo of voidness and oneself will be unaffected by other's verbal abuse. Rather they will become objects of compassion.

6. Right Livelihood: This world is for all creatures not just for human beings and the powerful ones. We must give a fair go and act decently towards other living beings. It is not considered clever to take advantage of others who are weaker than ourselves. Cultivate the ability to treat others with respect as an individual just as oneself desires to be happy. Think of animals and their welfare if you cannot deal too many unruly human beings. Focus on what you can do without causing direct harm on others and share things you have with others who need them most. Give to the needy and do not hoard wealth for it will only become one's own prison and create many enemies. You can not take anything with you when you die anyway.

7. Right Mindfulness: We know we should be fair to others but without deliberate mindfulness we are often very forgetful to do the very things we want to do ourselves. We may become angry with ourselves just because we were not mindful enough to bring the key left on the table before closing the door. You may become very cranky and may have a very hard day at work. This will create a very bad working environment for your colleagues who will blame it on your temper and so forth. Mindfulness practice requires consistent daily meditation practice on how to integrate it into every day life. In one Sutra it says: "One with mindfulness is happy and one without is unhappy".

8. Right Effort: One must be diligent to change one's habitual patterns. Just as weight conscious people get up early in the morning to jog and do exercise, likewise one who is conscious of the actual health of mind, one must employ right effort to break the negative habitual pattern of one's attitude to life and its problems. The effort to come here tonight can be regarded as right effort but we must implement what we have learnt from this meeting tonight. You do not learn these things in school, college, university, on the soccer field or in the pub. One should create an environment in the house to change one's habits, in the bed room, in the kitchen and wherever you are by yourself. Develop strong will inside you and this undying will and courage to do good for the benefit of many will be of great benefit whether you regard yourself as religious or not.

If we have individuals who adopt this theory of the eight noble paths they will experience the fourth noble truth, the truth of the cessation of suffering. Whether you believe in god or you are an atheist, or believe in reincarnation or in an eternal heaven and hell, it does not matter. You will only experience what you deserve. You will be a kind and sincere person, that is the purpose of religion. Who cares what we believe in? It largely depends on how we conduct our everyday lives. That is the essence of religious practice, the eight noble paths I have spoken about tonight are one of the many ways to practise it.

In brief, do not be too happy when everything is fine with you for there are many less fortunate beings who are suffering at this very moment. Do not forget the poor, sick, abandoned children, the lonely and aged people. Share your happiness by thinking of their welfare. Think of those caught in the war in former Yugoslavia and places like Cambodia and do something useful with compassion instead of indulging in your own fortune. Also do not be too sad when things are not going well with you. You are one of the many fortunate people in the world. Appreciate and be grateful for the things you have, this will reduce your sufferings. In order to experience the cessation of suffering, the fourth noble Truth, learn to be durable like the earth, fluid like the water, creative and light like the air and free and vast like the sky. Learn these qualities you yearn to cultivate from the mother nature, if one fails to find any human being devoid of fault. Finally may the ills of humanity not defile the ever shining truth of the enlightened ones, like the lotus flower untainted by the soil in which it grows. Accept what you can now, for this cannot be repeated again. What you can not accept now, do not reject it straight away, for you might find it useful later on. Let there be awareness, compassion and tolerance among all living beings.

*This was delivered at the Australian Parliament of World Religions, Pilgrim House, Canberra 26 June, 1993 and was subsequently published in Bhakti magazine.

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