

Buddhist Perspective on Inter-Faith Dialogue and Pluralism

Karam Tej S. Sarao
Professor and Head
Department of Buddhist Studies
Delhi University
Email: ktssarao@hotmail.com

If we want to understand matters deeply that concern humanity, we will need to walk across all the borders of races and religions. Interestingly, though all the institutionalized religions in theory propose that humility, compassion, sacrifice, mercy, honesty, kindness, and wisdom must be developed as the basic qualities of their character by all human beings, yet in practice religions are too often used to support the claims of one community against another. This contradiction between theory and practice of religions is behind the need for an inter-faith dialogue to secure a safe and peaceful future for humanity.

Buddhist Doctrines of Karma and Rebirth:

All the living beings are born myriads of times across the species. This makes all of us relatives of each other not only from the past but also in the future. We all also perform collective karma. So where is the scope for treating somebody as the other or the outsider?

Buddhism believes that the truth (*dhamma*) is not the sole property of the Buddhists alone. It can be found in other faiths too.

The Buddhist view on the limitation of human understanding of Ultimate Reality is well-clarified in the story related in the *Paramatthaka Sutta* of the *Sutta-Nipāta* about the **six blind men who found an elephant**. They all had a limited grasp of the whole, and were impeded by their blindness (i.e. *avijjā* or ignorance). In a way they were all right and all quite wrong. Thus, the Buddha taught that views must be understood as provisional and limited.

(Fausböll, V. (ed.), *The Sutta-Nipāta*, London: Pali Text Society 1885 : 156-158).

Cankī Sutta:

“A man has a faith. If he says ‘This is my faith,’ so far he maintains truth. But because of that he cannot proceed to the absolute conclusion. ‘This alone is Truth and everything else is false.’”

(Trenckner, V. and R. Chalmers (eds.), *The Majjhima Nikāya*, London: Pali Text Society, 1888-1896: sutta no. 95).

Sutta-Nipāta:

“To be attached to one view and to look down upon other views as inferior- this the wise man calls a fetter.”

(Fausböll, V. (ed.), *The Sutta-Nipāta*, London: Pali Text Society 1885: 156).

Sutta-Nipāta: “I do not call truth what the foolish confront each other with; they make their own view the truth; that is why they treat their opponents as fools.”

(Fausböll, V. (ed.), *The Sutta-Nipāta*, London: Pali Text Society 1885: 82).

Buddhism follows the goal of happiness and welfare of maximum number of people:

bahu jana hitāya bahu jana sukhāya

“Buddhism is not a religion which strengthens itself by persecuting others. Because it has loving-kindness as its basis, it can establish in strength the principle of Justice, Liberty and Equality to ensure peace and prosperity to all living beings”

(King, Winston L., *In the Hope of Nibbāna: An Essay on Theravada Buddhist Ethics*, LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing 1964: 262).

The Buddha made no distinction in the imparting of knowledge and threw open the doors of his saṃgha to all. Monks and nuns never made any distinction between people while begging for food and could approach any householder for a meal, or could eat at his/her house when invited by him

(Oldenberg, H. (ed.), *The Vinaya Piṭaka*, London: Pali Text Society, 1879-83: III.184-85; IV.80, 177).

One of the best statements relating to religious tolerance can be found in [King Aśoka's 12th Major Rock Edict](#):

“On each occasion one should honour another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other man; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one's own sect and harms the other man's. Again, whosoever honours his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own, with a view to showing it in a favourable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore, concord is to be commended, so that men may hear one another's principles and obey them”

(Thapar, R. 1998. *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, with new afterword, bibliography and index, Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks : 255).

As part of the Principle of Dependent Arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), Buddhism views humans as not only affecting each other but also dependent upon each other.

Buddhism sees religious teaching as a raft whose only purpose is to take one safely across the oceans of ignorance. After this the raft becomes worthless and must be discarded. Thus, the ultimate truth goes beyond a religion and the value of any belief need not be accepted blindly.

Buddhism transcends national identities and seeks to unite individual people, nations and the human race.

14th Dalai Lama:

“There are many different philosophies, but what is of basic importance is compassion, love for others, concern for others’ suffering, and reduction of selfishness. I feel that compassionate thought is the most precious thing there is. It is something that only we human beings can develop. And if we have a good heart, a warm heart, warm feelings, we can be happy and satisfied ourselves, and our friends will experience a friendly and peaceful atmosphere as well. This can be experienced **nation to nation, country to country, continent to continent.**”

(Gyatso, Tenzin. 1984. *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight*, New York: Snow Lion Publications : 11).

“Buddhism is not the possession of any race or nation but aspires to the unity of the human race on earth. Nationalism or racism are seen as forms of greed, hatred and delusion... We support the United Nations as a means towards the transcending of national barriers and the unification of the human family.”

(World Fellowship of Buddhism, *Green Buddhist Declaration*, Colombo (1980).