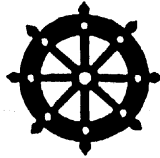


What is Buddhism?



1. How does the Church think of Buddhism?

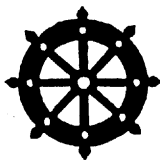
Since the Second Vatican Council Catholics have been encouraged to regard members of other Faiths not as foreigners or aliens but as neighbours and friends. If one word sums up the attitude proposed by the Council it is respect. The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions makes only the

briefest of references to Buddhism which, it says, 'in its multiple forms acknowledges the radical insufficiency of this shifting world. It teaches a path by which men, in a devout and confident spirit, can either reach a state of absolute freedom or attain supreme enlightenment by their own efforts or by higher assistance; (Nostra Aetate, 2).

But the Declaration speaks constantly of the need to work peacefully with men and women who follow different Faiths from our own but who hold so much in common with us. This is a theme which the present Pope, in his many travels to countries where there are often more non-Christians than Catholics, has constantly stressed. In

May 1984, visiting Korea, he said to the leaders of the principal religions: 'The Catholic Church is endeavouring to engage in *friendly dialogue* with all the great religions that have guided mankind throughout history. This we shall continue to do, so that our mutual understanding and collaboration may increase, and so that the spiritual and moral values we uphold may continue to offer wisdom and inner strength to the men and women of our time.' Then, in commending the religious vision of Buddhism he went on: 'The profound reverence for all life and nature, the quest for truth and harmony, self-abnegation and compassion, the ceaseless striving to transcend - these are among the noble hallmarks of your spiritual tradition that have led, and will continue to lead, the nation and the people through turbulent times to the haven of peace.'

These are some of the qualities which anyone who has some small contact with Buddhism will instantly recognise. Catholics can learn from this great tradition; at the same time we may be able to see something of ourselves reflected in its techniques and practices.



2. How do Buddhists think of themselves?

To become a buddhist means reciting a simple formula or statement of intent, the Three Refuges, as they are called:

I go to the Buddha for refuge;

I go to the Buddha's reaching for refuge;

I go to the Buddha's community of disciplines for refuge.

This is what makes a buddhist a buddhist - not a creed, not a statement of belief in gods and spirits, not complex devotional and ascetical practices; just a personal commitment to search for truth as the Buddha searched for truth.

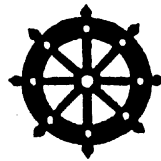
Put this way, it all sounds very simple. Certainly it is a very attractive religion and continues to make great headway in the west where its high moral standards, teaching about meditation and, perhaps above all, its commitment to peace and justice issues have generated a strong following. It would be easy to get the impression that Buddhism is a religion for a sophisticated elite - for saffron-clothed monks, distant other-worldly Zen masters or a handful of eccentric intellectuals, for people who have time and energy to pursue a lonely and essentially solitary quest. Indeed a fairly common view is that Buddhism is not a religion at all but a philosophy or way of life, that it represents an atheistic and rather pessimistic view of the world and

that it simply teaches people how to survive in face of a capricious and unpredictable Fate.

But you only have to take a cursory glance at the richness of buddhist life in this country - let alone at the wider buddhist world, with its five hundred million and more adherents and innumerable sects and forms in every continent - to realise how inadequate a version of Buddhism this is. We find plenty of examples of rich devotional life among buddhists. While it is true that no personal creator God plays any significant part in Buddhism, it would be wrong to assume that there is no such thing as devotion and ritual. The simple statements above mask a whole complex of rich ideas, themes and symbolism. Buddhism is as much a religion as Christianity in so far as it provides for certain basic human needs: for support, for hope, for belief in some greater meaning and purpose in life.

The language, however, is often very different. To enter into dialogue with a Buddhist is a more complicated exercise than dialoguing with a Muslim - not because the religion of the former is inherently more mysterious but because we share so much more in common with Muslims that we do with Buddhists. For all the differences between us, at least Muslims are monotheists. The Three Refuges make no mention of any God, nor do they speak of eternity or immortality or any sort of heaven. to be a Buddhist means following the Buddha, learning to see the world as he saw it and to experience the Eternal as he had experienced it. That vision is to be found in a tradition which has flowered

and developed in many different ways over more than two and a half thousand years. The two major schools of Buddhism, the Theravada or 'Way of the Elders' and the Mahayana or 'Great Vehicle' are both represented in this country. British buddhists - some 200,000 of them - come from all the major sects and schools, presenting us with many examples of the extraordinary diversity of this tradition: Zen monks in Northumbria, the Thai temple in Wimbledon, the Peace Pagoda in Battersea Park, the recent influx of Vietnamese. But even in countries as different as Nepal and Sri Lanka, each with their own particular religious 'style', the fundamentals remain the same: reliance on the memory of the teacher himself, on the teaching which has been preserved in the scriptures, and on the community of disciples who undertake to live out the details of the way which the Buddha taught.



Questions for discussion:

1. If buddhists do not recognise the significance of a Creator God, where can our dialogue with them begin?
2. What can Christians find in their own tradition which is comparable to the formula of Three Refuges?

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacles of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The Committee is grateful to its member Rev. Michael Barnes SJ for this contribution

**+ Kevin McDonald
Chairman**

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