

WHY BUDDHISM IS NOT A RELIGION

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I know that Buddhism is classified as a religion, but having studied it for over 37 years I am here to say IMO it is not. I was raised Catholic and that my friends is a religion.

Buddhism acknowledges no higher power than your own mind. It has no 'God' or deity up there that you have to please or otherwise suffer the consequences. Conversely there is no one that can save you other than your own self. It is up to you. Buddha was not a god and never became a god. He died like we all will and was quick to point out that he is no different from you and me. We all have Buddha Nature. Even worms do!

Buddhism has no creation myth and is not concerned about finding a beginning or an end to anything but suffering and ignorance. There is no starting point or ending point to cyclic existence and this world. Cycles by definition have no beginning and no end. There is no time of a first creation and no creator. Buddhism is concerned only that we realize the true nature of our own mind. It is not concerned itself with where we came from (or when) and where we are going (the next life).

Instead it is concerned only with waking up from this dream of cyclic existence. It recognizes the endless cycles of existence as beginning-less and endless. To Buddha this whole world is seen as a very real illusion, the answer to which can only be found by each one of us realizing the true nature of the mind. Buddha can't just somehow do it for all of us. We each have to do it ourselves.

What Buddha did was point out a method or way for each of us (when we get around to it) to become more aware and to just wake up. The word "Buddha" in Sanskrit simply means "Awakened." And the teachings that the historical Buddha left are called the "Dharma," which is simply the method or path to awaken and nothing more. The dharma is like a twelve-step program to train the mind.

Now this is only me speaking, but to my mind what the dharma of the Buddha lays out is a totally scientific way to train the mind, only "Science" has not quite gotten there itself yet. Scientists too need mind training.

I am not religious by any definition of the word. I don't worship anything and I don't go to church other than the natural world. I don't believe in a God up there helping or watching over me. Whatever I am, I am an equal part of what this is all about, and that is all I ask: that Buddhism treat me as a co-partner or something like that. It does.

I know that in this life I have to help myself. The Buddha, even if he were here in this room, could not simply reach over, touch me on the forehead, and enlighten me. The whole point of Buddhism is that it is a method we each have to do for ourselves. It is interactive. We must wake ourselves up and Buddha pointed out how to do it. Only we can do that.

I am embarrassed when people treat Buddhism as if it were somehow holy or other worldly and miraculous, making it simply a question of faith. Buddhism is not about faith. The miracle is that the dharma works and that is enough. I was raised as a naturalist and I know nature and

nature's laws quite well. Buddhism is the only spiritual method that I have found that is congruent with natural law – with the facts of science and nature. This is why I am surprised that more scientists are not Buddhists.

In fact in Tibetan Buddhism they have a term “The Lama of Appearances” that states that Mother Nature herself is like a guru and teaches the same dharma as a high human lama. Now that is congruency. And the Buddhists are the finest psychologists in the world IMO.

Yes I know that there are Buddhists (like all spiritual disciplines) that over-moralize and make everything into rules and taboos. If you follow the simple mediation that Buddha indicated, that is all that has to be done. Organized anything is asking for trouble, and spiritual organizations and religions are no exception. Keep it local and small.

I won't blather on much longer, but please note my objection to classifying what is simply a practical method to awaken (Buddhism) as if it was a full-blown religion like Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and so on. I have nothing against religions and appreciate a sincere religious person whenever I meet them. I am not an atheist or an agnostic. I am spiritual at heart, but in this fashion:

The word religion comes from the Latin word ‘religare’ which means to “bind back” or “tie down.” In other words religion of any kind is concerned with the things that last and last longest. In that case I could accept the dharma as being religious because the dharma points out what really lasts and is genuine, like the true nature of the mind.

If our concern is to find something lasting or true in this life to set our sails by, then we all must be religious at one time or another. If when shit hits the fan we all seek for solid ground to stand on, then we are all religious when that happens. Religion is about the things that last longest when all else fades in importance. This occurs for each of us when suddenly something untoward happens in our life, like a parent or loved one dies. Stuff fades fast in importance at those times and even the grittiest of us finds ourselves reaching for something more lasting that we can count on. That is all the religion I know, the things I can count on being there for me when all else fails. That is as close as I get to religion and the dharma has yet to fail me. Does that make me religious?

So sue me. Questions welcome.

Michael

Photo by me of the eleven-foot Buddha at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra near Woodstock New York.

