

Buddhism and Other Faiths

One of the most beautiful parts of our modern, internationally-connected world is the meeting of cultures and faiths: we live in a time, (and being in college) in a place, where we meet people from all walks of life and of all perspectives. For example, look at this chapel.

However, as most of human history has taught us, where there is contact, there is also collision: simply put, although diversity can be beautiful, it can also lead to conflict. I think there's no subject in which that is more apparent than religion.

So, how are we, as Buddhist practitioners, to view other religions? How did the Buddha view other religions, and how do modern teachers view other religions? How do we interact with others faiths, and how should we?

Like most things, most of these answers are up to you, but today, we'll discuss what other Buddhists have thought on this issue.

The Buddha and Other Faiths

- 1) Like with all things, I think it's often wise to look to the Buddha as our prime example: How did he view other religions?
- 2) As with most Buddhist stories, there are many accounts of the Buddha meeting with or talking about other religions and meditative traditions, all of which don't seem to really line up 100%. I think it's important to remember that the Buddha's way of speaking is geared towards the situation and the individual; this accounts for the differences.
- 3) The most obvious example I could think of is found in the Theravadan Tevijja Sutta, two young brahmins are arguing about religion; "*This* is the correct path led by Brahman so-and-so [Pakkharsati]." "Nuh-uh, *THIS* is the correct path taught by Brhman whats-his-name [Tarukkha]."
 - i) So, the two go visit the Buddha, and ask him whether "all [paths] lead the one who follows them to communion with God?"

*Note: When we're talking about "God" here, we're not necessarily talking about a theistic being; it could also be some generally higher-state, some sort of sacred goal.
 - ii) The Buddha leads the two brahmin in his usual question-answer way:

"Is there even a single teacher among those religious authorities versed in their tradition who has seen God face-to-face?"

"Certainly not, friend Gotama."

"Is there anyone among those religious authorities versed in their tradition, going back as far as seven generations of teachers, who has seen God face-to-face?"

"Certainly not, friend Gotama."

[It goes on this way]

“There is not a single religious authority... who has seen God face-to-face. So those religious authorities versed in tradition are saying ‘That path, which we neither know nor have seen, we declare to be the path to union; this is the direct path, this is the straight path that leads to salvation, and leads one who follows it to communion with God’... Doesn’t the talk of those religious authorities turn out to be ridiculous?”

- iii) The Buddha goes on to point out that most religious authorities do not resemble their teachings; if their teachings are peaceful, the authorities are stern; if the teachings teach poverty, they tend to be rich. Buddha is critical of this.
- iv) One of the brahmins begs the Buddha to teach them a new path—the path of the Dharma (four noble truths, eightfold path, concentrative meditation, etc etc etc). The Buddha tells the Brahmins that the Dharma leads to such a life, and a life that is more religious than dogma.
- vi) So, the Buddha seems to ultimately be critical of other faiths, right...?

Why we follow our faith, why they follow theirs

- 1) I don’t think he is actually being “critical,” so to speak, but simply is identifying what other faiths do, and what we as Buddhists do. There is no denying that, say, most theistic faiths require a certain degree in faith in a mysterious God—in an entity they can neither prove nor disprove. At the same time, there is no denying that as Buddhists, this issue is not appealing to us.
- 2) What we have to remember is that the Buddha’s teachings shrink our religious horizons, in a sense: for a Buddhist practitioner, we are not concerned with big philosophical questions—*What’s the Ultimate Good; What is God?; Is God real?; etc*—we are concerned with suffering, and the alleviation of suffering. We’re not in the business of uncertainties; very seldom are we even in the business of “wrong and right, good and evil”; we’re in the business of becoming content.
 - i) So, it’s not that we’re really *opposed* to other faiths, or really think their *wrong*, so much as we don’t bother to discuss what they discuss.
- 3) I think what it comes down to is that, for us, Buddhism is *our* path, it is *our* choice, and most, if not all, Buddhists would agree that it is the Path to enlightenment; however, the Buddha never said it is *THE* path, *THE* choice for everyone, and in this sense, we are to be respectful of other faiths.

-I think there’s a very overlooked beauty to the fact that the Buddha never spoke unless asked; he never sought other religious folk to convert them, but let them come to Him at their choice. I think that’s why a lot of us come to Buddhism to begin with: because it welcomes us, but never has an expectation for us to join it.

-Ron gave me an excellent article by Bhante Gunaratena about Buddhism and other faiths, and I think the Venerable sums it up perfectly:

“Buddhist tolerance springs from the recognition that the dispositions and spiritual needs of human beings are too vastly diverse to be encompassed by any single teaching, and thus that these needs will naturally find expression in a wide variety

of religious forms”

-We don't have to agree with another faith in its entirety, but we should be able to respect it and see its merit. If a faith emphasizes a life of morality, and teaches us to remove our attachments to that which is impermanent (“Don't store yourselves treasures on earth, where Moths and Rust destroy...”), even though the context and the means may be different, the ends will likely look similar.

-Very often, I think we can even learn a lot from other faiths. I know personally, my interactions at this chapel with Muslims, Jews, and Catholics has given me new insights on how they find contentment and morality. We can learn from other faiths just as much as they can learn from us.

4) I like to remember what the Tibetan Saint Milarepa said on this subject. When he attained enlightenment, his sister came and visited him, and asked whether he was opposed to other faiths now that he'd seen the Way. After all, if he's enlightened, and if others are not, he must be right and they must be wrong, right?

i) But Milarepa says this:

“I am of course opposed to those hypocrites who have assumed a religious garb only for the sake of the honor of attending it, and have succeeded in getting by hear the contents of a volume or two. And who...strive for victory for their own party and the defeat for the opposite.

But as for those who are sincere devotees, although they be of different sects and creeds, if their principle be not like the one mentioned above [the one of hypocrisy], then there cannot be much disagreement between the aim of the one or the other, so I cannot be opposed to any of them.”

*There is that big insight: *there cannot be much disagreement between the aim of the one or the other*. There is *SOME* disagreement—there are as many differences as there are similarities—but often times, those differences can teach us about ourselves and our own religious path, which is the biggest similarity we share.

-Thus, of course we ultimately think Buddhism is the Path for us, and that it shows the way to Enlightenment, to contentment and happiness. But at the same time, we should always be willing to hear and learn about other faiths, and to let them inspire us where they can.