

WHAT I EXPECT OF FRIENDSHIP WITH CHRISTIANS

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Dear Friends,

Today in our modern world the distance between one part of the world and another has shrunk rapidly as a result of the many remarkable advances in contemporary technology. Such rapid progress means that communication and travel links are today much easier to establish. Consequently, East can meet West so much more easily than ever before, but at the same time there is an increasing awareness of an element of change pervading society which is affecting every value structure and every area of people's lives worldwide. This is particularly evident in the areas of people's cultures, economies, politics and religions. In this day and age we are able to communicate and get to know one another much more easily than ever before, so the task of establishing the groundwork for rapport and dialogue between the peoples of the world is not as difficult as it once was in the early days of the twentieth century. This improvement has meant that we can now study and so gain an appreciation of other people's cultures, social and political systems and religious beliefs. This can only be good provided we do not expect more from others than we do from ourselves. This level of expectation is a basic theme I wish to develop on the subject assigned to me for this conference, "What I Expect of Friendship with Christians". On this subject I would, first of all, like to say a few words about what it is 'a Buddhist expects from another Buddhist' before offering my comments on **the main subject of this talk.**

Diversity and Unity

As all of you know very well when we speak about Buddhism as it exists here in the western world, it does not mean that we are referring to one school of Buddhist belief only, as Buddhism has two principal traditions, the Mahayana and the Theravadin. Within the Mahayana School there are many separate sects; such as the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism, and many Chinese, Japanese and Korean schools. When we speak about the Theravadin tradition we include all three of its traditions too, the Myanmar, the Thai and the Sri Lankan. On the whole practising Buddhists in the East will tend to study and follow a particular Buddhist tradition, exclusively. However, in the Western world this is not necessarily the case. There a person interested in Buddhism can easily have access to both schools of Buddhism and their various sectarian traditions and practices. This situation also prevails in the Christian tradition wherein there are three main groups, the Catholic, the

Protestant and the Orthodox and their various established denominations. As I said before, nowadays the peoples of the East can meet those from the West fairly easily and meaningful dialogues can be established. However, truly speaking, before we can expect to establish a rapport or enter into a constructive dialogue with another Christian we first have to gain a sound understanding of our own religion's beliefs and practices. This is most relevant to my topic because a Buddhist expects when he tries to engage in dialogue with someone from a different religion not to restrict himself to the study of one particular school of Buddhism but he should expand the scope of his study so he can have a greater understanding of all the traditions. Furthermore, it is impossible to have a successful dialogue between the representatives of the entire Christian tradition and one representative from one branch of the Buddhist tradition and vice versa. This is not a modern idea but a very ancient one. The great Buddhist Emperor Ashoka, who lived in India in the 3rd Century B.C.E. had an edict inscribed upon a stone pillar on a special site at Sarnath near Varanasi. The pillar stands to this day and a translation of his edict reads:

The one who does not respect another's religion does not respect his own. The one who respects another's religion respects his own. This edict is the gist of my message for all of you on the subject of what a Buddhist expects from other Buddhist and Christians and the followers of any other religion also.

Attachment

The Buddha declared that there are four kinds of attachment (Upadana) which lead to human suffering: there is attachment to sense objects; to views or ideas; to rites and rituals; and to self.. Whenever we grow attached to our own views and philosophical notions, religious rites and rituals, we can lose the ability to keep an open mind and behave with flexibility and tolerance towards others who may hold a different point of view. Naturally, the more we cling to our personal beliefs and views the less able we are to listen objectively to those of others. Furthermore, we can become egotistical and over-sensitive to criticism and if our beliefs are attacked, challenged or condemned, then we are liable to react angrily and suffer for our anger. The Buddha always cautioned against having attachment of any kind as it is the root cause of all suffering. When we are over-attached to our own religious beliefs and practices we often spend a lot of time and money on affirming those beliefs through participating in religious rites and rituals and we then become so attached to our own system of religious creeds and rituals that we often fail to consider and appreciate those other people hold. This situation is regrettable and arises because we are blindly and emotionally attached to what we think is right and cannot see another's point of view with any objectivity.

Objective Study

At this point I would, therefore, like to say that whenever we study a religion other than our own we need to do so objectively if our effort is to be genuinely

worthwhile and productive of knowledge, insight and understanding. Indeed, even before we embark on such a study we need to have gained a deep understanding and insight into our own religion. Speaking as a Buddhist, then my expectation and wish for my Christian brothers and sisters everywhere is for them to acquire a deep knowledge and appreciation of Christianity. If you do understand what Christ taught in depth then undoubtedly you will be able to gain a more than superficial understanding of what the Buddha taught and you will also come to appreciate the very universal and timeless significance of the Buddha's teachings, the essence of which has been briefly summarized as:

*Learn to do good
Cease to do evil
And purify the mind
This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.*

Buddhism and Christianity are both very old, well established religions and both of them proclaim very profound yet practical truths and ethical teachings which have been devoutly embraced by many millions of people down through the ages. If we are to succeed in establishing a dynamic dialogue capable of allowing us to arrive at a real appreciation of these two age-old religions then first of all we must put forth the necessary effort to study and investigate our own religion in depth. However, if we then cling to our own religion and its teachings to the exclusion of any other we will have closed our minds and eyes to anything different and potentially beneficial. We will then be intellectually isolated and find it much more difficult to objectively consider any other religious system or tradition and its spiritual benefits. I therefore advocate that we all make an objective effort to first investigate our own religious beliefs and practices. Dr. Raimon Pannikar, an Indian Catholic priest, once said, "I left [Rome] as a Christian; I found myself [in India] a Hindu; and I return [to Rome] as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian. [R.Pannikar, Faith and Belief: A Multi Religious Experience]

Wisdom and Truth

The answer to the question, 'What a Buddhist expects from Christianity' may be approached in many different ways. However, for anyone wishing to investigate Buddhism in order to broaden their knowledge of it and enjoy its many spiritual benefits the answer is very simple. A Buddhist expects simply tolerance and freedom from suspicion and fear. Tolerance can be developed only when we have insight based on right understanding. With respect to Christianity, the requisite insight can be achieved if we thoroughly investigate Christ's teachings. As our power of discernment develop our understanding and insight into his teachings will become clearer and deeper. This insight will encourage us to be tolerant, too. Buddhists say that Wisdom and Compassion are virtues that should go hand in hand as they are complementary and should be exercised together. Likewise, as your insight into Christ's teachings grows and your own understanding deepens,

you will in time come to have true love and compassion in your hearts and tolerance will develop quite naturally and immediately. The main point I wish to make here is that one should gain a genuine appreciation of Christ's message. I would also like to say that if we cautiously cling to and rely on the teachings and doctrines of our own religion, to the exclusion of all else, and adhere to them because of mere blind faith then we may not be able to see the truth of any other religion. Truth is Truth and it does not depend on time or space, culture or place, although the expression men give to it may vary and be influenced by various circumstances. Saint John, in his gospel, records Christ as saying: 'Ye shall know the truth and the Truth shall make you free.' This is a most worthy goal for all men everywhere and in every age. To know the Truth is very important but it cannot be known through blind faith. 'Seeing is believing' and this is the role of insight, the cultivation of which none of us should neglect.

Suspicion and Fear

With regard to second thing a Buddhist expects from a Christian, namely freedom from suspicion and fear, I would like to say this. Suspicion and fear are closely linked. To feel these is human nature. It often happens that when we encounter something new or something outside our knowledge and experience, we naturally view it with suspicion and fear simply because we do not as yet understand it. However, feelings of suspicion and fear are a real hindrance to our understanding. During the Buddha's ministry, when the Kalamas came to him and voiced their doubts about religious teachings the Buddha responded to their criticisms and questions by saying, "You Kalamas, if you do not understand something by yourselves then you will always have suspicions and doubts about it. I therefore say to you, Ehi passiko - "Come and See", for yourselves before you decide to accept it."

I too would like to invite my Christian friends, assembled here to 'Ehi passiko' - 'Come and See' the Buddha's teachings for yourselves before you even try to think about accepting them. The Buddha taught many things in the course of his forty-five year ministry but if, on investigation, you do find anything that is beneficial for you personally then take it to heart, follow it and leave the rest behind. Buddhism is not, strictly speaking, a religion in the sense in which the word is generally understood; rather Buddhism is a way of life based on the cultivation of Wisdom. So truly speaking if you wish to practise Buddhism it is not necessary for you to become a 'Buddhist'. The Buddha often said, "I am only a guide to show you the way to liberation but you yourselves have to work out your own salvation." The Buddha is not regarded as a saviour of men but a guide and a teacher whose example anyone can follow.

The Buddha practised many moral perfections and austerities during many many lifetimes until his final effort bore fruit and enabled him to achieve his goal of Enlightenment. If we too wish to be free from all bondages and suffering and obtain Wisdom and Enlightenment we can follow his example regardless of our state in life. Although the Buddha can save no one, he is an inspiring exemplar of

the way to attain the Wisdom that brings Enlightenment and Liberation. If you do wish to investigate Buddhism then do so with an open and enquiring mind; then any feelings of suspicion you may have at the outset will disappear. When suspicion no longer colours our judgement then there will be no more fear. Fear is a great hindrance to anyone on the spiritual path. When someone mentions another spiritual path or religious teaching we almost always feel afraid and think perhaps our religious convictions are being threatened or we might convert or we might lose the security of our religious beliefs. This is because our own strong convictions about our own religion are usually rooted in an emotionally based faith and attachment and it is this wrong attachment which engenders fear in us. I sincerely hope that you will first investigate the Buddha's teachings before you commit yourself to the practise of them and, then, undoubtedly suspicion and fear will disappear. Nowadays, many Christian monks, priests and nuns and lay people practise Buddhist meditation in their daily lives and their lives are enriched by it. Some of them have said that because of meditation their understanding of their Christian faith and its teachings had grown deeper and stronger.

The Three Refuges

In conclusion, I would like to explain briefly to you the significance of the practice of taking the Three Refuges and in so doing I hope you will come to realize what Buddhism really is. Buddhists resort to the taking of the Three Refuges on many special occasions and in many situations in daily life. Taking refuge involves purposely reciting these words three times:

Buddham saranam gacchami - To the Buddha I go for Refuge
Dhammam saranam gacchami - To the Dhamma I go for Refuge
Sangham saranam gacchami - To the Sangha I go for Refuge

Accordingly to the Buddha there are two kinds of illness or disease which afflict human society: physical and mental illness. The Buddha also said that there are few people in this world who are free from physical disease for one moment, one day, one week or one year or even one hundred years. However, there is no one in the world who is free from mental disease. Disease means dis-ease, or not at ease. When something happens to us which affects our body or mind it becomes dis-eased. When desire, anger, jealousy etc. arise in our mind then the body becomes dis-eased. All human beings are social beings. It is a fact that no one can live without society. Whenever our senses come into contact with a sense object we react with either like or dislike. These likes and dislikes are cravings and aversions. Whenever they arise in us our minds become diseased. Whenever we experience unhappiness or sorrow, lamentation or any kind of negative state, then negative feelings arise in us because our minds are already unhealthy and we already had disease. When someone does something or says something which goes against my ideas I become angry. This happens not only because of what the person did or said but also because I have anger, craving or attachment in me as latent disposition

(anusaya-kilesa). If I do not have any craving, anger or attachment in me then I will not become angry because of whatever he or she said or did to me. The Buddha said that we ourselves are responsible for our own happiness or our own unhappiness and it is we, ourselves who create our own heaven and hell. Therefore we regard the Buddha as a great physician, who can diagnose our disease and prescribe the appropriate medicine to cure it. It is for this reason that when taking refuge we say: 'Buddham saranam gacchami', ('to the Buddha I go for refuge'). The medicine the Buddha offered is the Dhamma. The Dhamma is threefold: it consists of Sila (morality), Samadhi (concentration) and Pañña (wisdom).

Generally speaking, Sila means moral precepts. Traditionally we formulate these into different kinds of precepts to be observed by the laity or by monks and nuns. Briefly speaking, Sila means that one should not do any evil. Whatever deeds we do, whatever words we speak, our actions and our words should cause no harm to any living being or cause them to be unhappy or bring them any sorrow. If we do harm to any other being which makes them unhappy, then we are going against Sila, the moral precepts.

Samadhi, or concentration, means meditation. Meditation in our day to day existence means to control our emotions, thoughts and feelings. If we cannot control our own mind and feelings then we cannot preserve the moral precepts. Any unwholesome action or speech we perform with ill intent causes suffering and stems initially from our minds and thoughts. The Buddha opened the Dhammapada with these words:

*"Mind is the forerunner of all evil states.
Mind is chief; they are mind-made.
If one speaks or acts with a wicked mind, suffering follows one.
If one speaks and acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one."*

The Buddha also says:

*"Though one should conquer a million men in battle,
he is no real conqueror,
yet he indeed is the noblest victor who has conquered himself."*

(Dhammapada)

Pañña (or wisdom), here means understanding the true nature of our own life. When we understand that the nature of life is impermanent, suffering and without an unchanging self, this understanding can dispel all our negative forces. This means when Wisdom arises then one can uproot all the latent defilements and dispositions. It is just like when a light appears, darkness is dispelled. This kind of penetrating wisdom can be attained through practising meditation. So it is for curing our dis-ease that we take refuge in the Dhamma.

To take refuge in the Sangha means that we follow the Holy Community, the Sangha. Anyone who practises Sila, Samadhi and Pañña and by so doing has

purified their mind to some extent, may be said to have become a member of the Sangha (or Holy Community). If we want to cure ourselves of our dis-ease, then we should follow their path. It is to this end that we take refuge in the Sangha. If you understand the real meaning of the taking of these Three Refuges you will discover that there is, in actual fact, no Buddhism. Anyone, regardless of whether one is a Buddhist or not, who wishes to cure his or her illness can and should practise this threefold Dhamma. Anyone who practises the Dhamma and applies Sila, Samadhi and Pañña in his or her daily life can be said to living a pure and happy life. I would like to say my Christian friends, therefore, have no fear or suspicion about practising Buddhism, for Buddhism is not a religion of saving grace but a way of life and a wholesome path to follow for the achievement of our own liberation. It is a path to happiness and well-being.

May All Beings Be Happy!

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