CHAPTER FIVE

PLURALISM IN BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

Evolution of the Theory of Religious Pluralism

Since late twentieth century the word "pluralism" has become one of the catch words of the new world order in which people of different faiths live together peacefully while maintaining their differences. The credit to make the pluralism concept popular in contemporary Christian theology in particular and philosophy of religion in general undoubtedly goes to the writings of Christian thinkers and philosophers, such as John Hick, W. Cantwell Smith, Paul F. Knitter, and other like-minded scholars. As a result a vast amount of literature has grown up around their writings.

In the given situation of the contemporary world, religious and cultural pluralism have become an inescapable reality and every day in our life we are witnessing the encounter of the people of a particular religion with the people of other religious denominations. Pluralistic situation to which we are forced to face today is a result of several factors like, an explosion of knowledge about various religious traditions, developments in the scientific study of religion, and personal contacts between followers of different faiths due to the scientific and technological achievements of this century, massive immigration from East to West, so on and so forth.¹

Before delineating the Buddhist perspective on pluralistic situation of the world it is pertinent to discuss briefly the hypothesis of the concept of

pluralism propounded by above mentioned three scholars. According to Wilfred Cantwell Smith - 'the religious life of mankind from now on, if it is to be lived at all, will be lived in a context of religious pluralism. This is true for all of us: not only for 'mankind' in general on an abstract level, but for you and me as individual persons. No longer are people of other persuasions peripheral or distant, the idle curiosities of travelers' tales. The more alert we are, and the more involved in life, the more we are finding that they are our neighbors, our colleagues, our competitors, our fellows. Confucians and Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, are with us not only in the United Nations, but down the street. Increasingly, not only is our civilization's destiny affected by their actions; but we drink coffee with them personally as well'.

John Hick, renowned British philosopher of religion, has argued that the time has come to shift from "a Ptolemaic (i.e. one's-own-religion centered) to a Copernican (i.e. God-centered) view of the religious life of mankind." Just as the Copernican revolution represented a shift from the ancient, long-standing Ptolemaic dogma that the earth is the center of the revolving universe to the realization that the sun is the center - with all its planets, including the earth, revolving around it - so modern Christian theology of religions needs a Copernican revolution that "involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is God who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including [Christianity], serve and revolve around him."\(^4\)

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Paul F. Knitter⁵, the renowned American Catholic theologian, has made a significant contribution towards the evolution of the theory of religious pluralism by propounding the concept of "unitive pluralism". According to him ‘[U] nitive pluralism is a unity in which each religion, although losing some of its individualism (its separate ego), will intensify its personality (its self-awareness through relationship). Each religion will retain its own uniqueness, but this uniqueness will develop and take on new depths by relating to other religions in mutual dependence’.

While elaborating his concept of unitive pluralism, Knitter⁶ proposes "A Correlational and Globally Responsible Model for Dialogue" in his famous book One Earth Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility. In order to explain the meaning of Jesus and his message for today's world, not just for Christians but for everyone he proposed this model. According to him the main purpose of this model is to avoid the "absolutist" language and absolute claims that put Christians in a superior position over others, by rejecting "adjectives such as 'one and only,' 'definitive,' 'superior,' 'absolute,' 'final,' 'unsurpassable,' 'total' to describe the truth they have found" in the New Testament. Knitter⁷ has further argued that this new model gives Christians a chance to affirm and announce Jesus as really divine and savior to the world without insisting that he alone is divine and savior: "Verily, but not only." He has explained further that this

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⁷ Ibid., p. 35. Also see Paul F. Knitter, Jesus and the Other Names: Christian Mission and Global Responsibility, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.
sort of understanding [t]heologically ... means that while Christians can and must continue to announce Jesus of Nazareth as one in whom the reality and saving power of God is incarnate and available, they will also be open to the possibility/probability that there are others whom Christians can recognize as son or daughter of God. Personally, such a pluralistic christology allows and requires Christians to be committed fully to Christ but at the same time genuinely open to others who may be carrying out similar and equally important roles.

Religious pluralism has different connotation than Religious toleration. While the latter denotes the condition of accepting or permitting others' religious beliefs and practices which disagree with one's own, the former is taken to mean that variety of religious beliefs do exist and is not harmful but healthy. Thus religious pluralism, of course, is taken as the attitude that it is salubrious to have a variety of religions. Richard P. Hayes⁸ is of the view that such an attitude might be founded, for example, on an analogy with biology. He says that ‘The health of each living organism, it could be argued, is enhanced by the general health of the organism’s wider environment, and the health of this wider environment is in turn enhanced by the rich variety of species of organisms living therein. The value of variety, if one follows this biological analogy, is not merely aesthetic, not merely a pleasant respite from the monotony of too much uniformity; rather, variety is what makes life of any kind possible. Similarly, it could be argued by a devoted religious pluralist, the variety of religious beliefs and practices and experiences and modes of expression are vital to human survival and self-

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understanding. And just as the health of an individual organism, such as a cow, might actually be enhanced by the presence of other apparently annoying organisms, such as gadflies and mosquitoes, the health and perhaps even the very survival of any one religious tradition might actually be enhanced by the presence of other apparently antagonistic traditions, or by the presence of heresies within the same tradition. The robust religious pluralist would take the view that her general well-being is somehow increased by the presence of religious traditions other than her own, including those religious traditions that she may personally regard as distasteful or even threatening.

There are two groups of scholars of Philosophy of religion. One who believes that religious pluralism is relatively new ideology and very few of the major religious traditions have espoused the notion that more than one claim to ultimate reality could be valid as most of the historical religions are based in some way either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition/traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic/racial supremacy. It has posed some problems for those who like to adhere to unreformed traditional religions. The other group believes that the phraseology “religious pluralism” signify not only the mere acknowledgment that there is variety of religions but also signify that the variety is healthy and therefore something to be desired and thereby cites many examples from the teachings of the particular religion to which they deal with. Here we would discuss both the attitudes with suitable examples from the Buddhist texts before deriving any conclusion on the same.
Pluralism in Theravada Teachings

In order to ascertain Theravada Buddhist attitude towards religious pluralism an example of undetermined or unexplained issues (Pali avyākatavatthūni, Sanskrit avyākrtavastūni) from the Pali texts has been cited by the scholars. According to numerous texts, the Buddha has been depicted saying that “I have not determined whether:

1. The world is eternal (sassato loko),
2. The world is non-eternal (asassato loko),
3. The world has boundaries (antava loko),
4. The world is unbounded (anantava loko),
5. Life is the physical body (tam jīvaṁ tam sarīraṁ),
6. Life is one thing and the physical body is another (aṇṇaṁ jīvaṁ aṇṇaṁ sarīraṁ),
7. One who knows the truth exists after death (hoti tathāgato param maraṇā),
8. One who knows the truth does not exist after death (na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā),
9. One who knows the truth both exists and does not exist after death (hoti ca na ca hoti tathāgato param maraṇā),
10. One who knows the truth neither exists nor does not exist after death (neva hoti na na hoti tathāgato param maraṇā),
11. Discontent is caused by oneself (sayam kātam dukkham),
12. Discontent is caused by another (param kātam dukkham)
13. Discontent is caused by both oneself and another (sayam kataṅca param kataṅca hoti),
14. Discontent, being caused neither by oneself nor by another, arises spontaneously (asaṁ kāraṁ aparāṁ kāraṁ adhiccaramuppannam dukkham).
Different scholars have offered different explanations for why the Buddha chose not to speak whether he agreed or disagreed with these fourteen issues. Scholar like T.R.V. Murti cites the Buddha’s silence on certain questions as part of his evidence for his conclusion that the Buddha’s teaching was a kind of Absolutism. David J. Kalupahana provides an alternative explanation of the Buddha’s silence. He argues that the Buddha remained silent on these issues because he accepted only what could be experienced through the senses, whereas the fourteen propositions mentioned above dealt with matters that could not be decided by sensual experience. As no answer based on experience is possible, the Buddha remained silent when pressed for an answer and maintained that the questions as to whether the Tathāgata exists (hoti) or arises (uppajjati), does not exist or does not arise, both or neither, do not fit the case (na upetī)\(^9\). However, when we explore Pali texts we find that Lord Buddha himself has provided answer for his silence on the fourteen aforementioned questions. In the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta\(^10\) of the Dīgha-Nikāya Lord Buddha has said:

“Why, venerable sir, has the Lord not determined [the answers to these questions]?” “Because, Poṭṭhapāda, this is not connected to a purpose, nor is it connected to virtue, nor is it connected with the life of purity, nor does it lead to humility, nor to dispassion, nor to cessation, nor to tranquility, nor to superior understanding, nor to supreme awakening, nor to nirvāṇa. Therefore, I have not determined.”

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\(^10\) The Dīgha-Nikāya, ix. 28.
“What then, venerable sir, has the Lord determined?”
“I have determined that this is discontent, this is the cause of discontent, this is the cessation of discontent, and this is the path leading to the cessation of discontent.”

In the above lines Lord Buddha clearly says that all he has determined is the Four Noble Truths. He further says that he has taught the Four Noble Truths because these truths are connected to a purpose, are connected to virtue, are connected with the life of purity and lead to humility, and dispassion, and cessation, and tranquility, and superior understanding, and supreme awakening, and nirvāṇa.

Besides the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta of the Dīgha-Nikāya we do find answer to the question of why he has not determined the answers to the fourteen questions in at least one sutta in each of the four Nikāya-s. For example, in the Cūla-Mālukya-sutta\(^\text{11}\) of the Majjhima-nikāya, the Buddha gives an answer in the same vein as he has given in the Poṭṭhapāda-sutta. In this sutta he adds:

Living the life of purity does not depend on the view that the world is eternal, nor does it depend on the view that the world is not eternal. Whether or not the world is eternal or not eternal, there is surely birth, growing old, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. And I have explained how to bring those things to an end here and now [that is, in this very life].

\(^{11}\) Majjhima-nikāya I. 430.
In the Samyuttanikāya\(^{12}\), when asked why he does not determine the answer, the Buddha replies in the following words:

> Let me ask you what is the reason why the wandering ascetics with other views try to answer these questions, whereas Gotama the recluse does not try to answer them. The reason is that other wandering ascetics think that the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind either belong to them, or are their selves, or are part of their-selves. But the Tathāgata, being a fully enlightened Arahanta, does not think of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind as belonging to him, nor does he think of them “These are myself.” The Tathāgata, unlike other wandering ascetics, also does not regard feelings, perception, mentality or awareness as things that belong to him or as being himself or as being part of himself. There is nothing about which the Tathāgata says “This is mine. This is I. This is my self.”

In the aforementioned passage it is clearly said that who so ever thinks of either the living body or the mind (or soul) as the self or as belonging to the self must realize that the body and mind are impermanent. Those who realize that everything is impermanent and identify themselves with impermanent things filled with fear that the time will come when they will cease to exist. Before such realization they were filled with a desire to live (jivitumkāma) and a desire not to die (amaritukāma) and therefore they believe what they want to believe i.e., that there is life after death. On the other hand, those

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\(^{12}\) Paraphrase of Samyuttanikāya 4. 391.
who are attached to pleasures and wish to pursue pleasures without caring of the consequences of their actions and also choose not to be responsible in their actions, also believe exactly what they want to believe i.e., that there is no life after death.

On the contrary, Buddha is one who realizes that all discontents and sufferings arise due to ignorance, which takes the form of identifying the body and the mind as the self. When this false identification comes to an end to any one, his all discontents as well as all needs to discover answers to such cosmological, psychological and thanatological questions disappears.

The Sabbasutta of the Saṁyutta-nikāya lord Buddha has uttered the following words:

Monks, I will teach you ‘everything’. Listen to it. What, monks, is ‘everything’? Eye and material form, ear and sound, nose and odor, tongue and taste, body and tangible objects, mind and mental objects. These are called ‘everything’. Monks, he who would say: “I will reject this everything and proclaim another everything,” he may certainly have a theory. But when questioned, he would not be able to answer and would, moreover, be subject to vexation. Why? Because it would not be within the range of experience (avisaya).\(^{13}\)

In the above passage the Buddha has clearly said that one should not think beyond his senses and repeatedly emphasize on the judgments of value as to

what is beneficial and what is harmful (kusala-akusala), what is beautiful and what ugly (sobhana-asobhana), and what is right and what is wrong (sammā-micchā). Incompetent or wrongful actions (pāpa) are explained as those that are unbeneﬁcial to oneself and to others, whereas what is beneﬁcial is that which is beneﬁcial to oneself and others.

Cultivation of wisdom helps one to determine which actions of the body, speech and thought are beneﬁcial and what are harmful (kusala-akusala). Thus the most important aspect of Buddha’s teaching is the emphasis placed on the cultivation of moral discrimination.

It is amply clear from the above discussion that for the Buddha the matter of central concern to him was the presence of suffering (dukkha) and the question of how suffering can be eradicated. When asked by the King Milinda what the ultimate purpose of becoming a monk is, Ven. Nagasena answered that “The purpose of our renunciation is that this discontent may perish, and that no further discontent may arise; completely passing away, without attachment to the world, is our ultimate aim.”

Thus it is clear that according to the Buddha the religious life has only one ultimate goal. However, in the Ariya-pariyesana-sutta (Discourse on the noble quest) of the Majjhima-nikāya, the Buddha is portrayed as explaining that there are two kinds of quest, the noble and the ignoble. The ignoble quest, he explains, is the search for things that are liable to birth, ageing, decay, death, discontent and contamination; it is, for example, the quest for such things as family, servants, livestock and gold and silver. All these

14 Milinda-pañha II.1.5
things are liable to birth and ageing and contamination, and all except gold and silver are liable to disease, death, and discontent. Despite this fact, says Gotama, people of the world, who are enslaved by their addictions to possessions and who are liable to birth because of their belief in a self, seek out what is likewise liable to birth, and to decaying with age, and to death and discontent. The noble quest, on the other hand, is the quest for that which is without birth, ageing, decay, death, discontent and contamination. This noble quest is for nibbāna, “the ultimate security against bondage.” Compared to this goal, other goals are regarded not only less than ultimate, but also as ultimately ignoble and unworthy. In this “Discourse on the noble quest” Gotama relates how he grew dissatisfied with the created things of the world, since whatever was created also perished, and went out in search of that which is not created and therefore not perishable. Studying under one teacher after another, Gotama found no teaching satisfactory, because each teaching that he encountered did “not conduce to disregard nor to dispassion, nor to stopping nor to tranquility, nor to nibbāna.” (p. 165) Finally Gotama abandoned all his teachers and set out by himself, and having done so he finally won nibbāna, described as the unborn, the unageing, undecaying, undying, unsorrowing, stainless. And when he attained nibbana, the Buddha claims that he knew: “The freedom of my mind can never be lost. This is my last birth. I shall never be reborn again.”

This well-known narrative, which occurs in several parts of the Pali Canon, depicts Gotama’s renunciation of the domestic life and his eventual attainment of nibbāna. It also emphasizes the point that there is only one ultimate goal for those who follow the Buddha, namely, nibbāna, which is characterized as an unending freedom from discontent. This freedom is said
to be due to the eradication of the root cause of discontent, which is the thought “I am” (asmi-mâna). And so it is no surprise to hear Sariputta proclaim in the Dasuttara Sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya that there is only one thing to be realized (sacchikātabba), namely, imperturbable mental freedom (akuppa ceto-vimutti). This imperturbable mental freedom, otherwise known as nibbana, is also described as the ultimate happiness (paramā sukhaṁ), as for example in the passage from the Vinaya¹⁵ that reads: “Happy is freedom from desire in this world, getting beyond all desires, and the putting away of that pride that comes from the thought ‘I am’. This truly is the ultimate happiness.”

Although it is abundantly clear in the Pali canon that nibbāna is free from decaying and perishing only because it is an absence and not a positively existing thing, there came to be much confusion concerning the exact nature of this ultimately desirable goal. And so we find that by the time of the Milinda-paṇha, the text referred to above that creatively narrates a dialogue between a Hellenistic king and a Buddhist monk named Nagasena, a good deal of attention is devoted to explaining just what kind of thing nibbāna is. In that text it is explained, for example, that nibbāna is the same as cessation. Foolish people, it is explained, take pleasure in the senses and in the objects of the senses. Taking delight in such things, they cling to them. Clinging to them, they are carried along by them as if by a great flood. They cannot escape birth, old age, and death, nor can they escape grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow and despair. But the wise take no pleasure in the senses or in the objects of the senses. So for them, clinging comes to an end. Consequently, the longing for existence comes to an end.

¹⁵ Mahāvagga I.1.3.
And when the longing for existence comes to an end, so does rebirth. When rebirth comes to an end, there is a complete cessation of all forms of sorrow. That cessation is called nibbāna. Not all people attain nibbāna, says Nagasena, but all people who learn which causes and conditions to eliminate and which causes and conditions to cultivate do attain nibbāna. King Mūlinda asks Nagasena to explain what it means to say that nibbāna is never produced. The monk replies that there is a sense in which nibbāna is like a skill that an apprentice learns to master. It is the skill of being free from distress, aloof from danger, confident, peaceful, calm, cheerful, happy, pure and at ease. In this sense, one can say that nibbāna exists and is something that a person achieves. But there is another sense in which nibbāna is nothing but an absence. Suppose, says Nagasena, that a man were in a pit of burning coals. If by making a great exertion he were to get free of the pit, he would experience great joy. The joy is very real, but it arises owing to the mere absence of the torment of the burning coals. Similarly, when one comes to an end of the torments of lust, desire and delusion, there is a great sense of relief brought about by a mere absence. When a person looks at the course of life, all one sees is that one is born, one grows old and one dies. There is no joy or satisfaction in being born. There is no joy in growing old. There is no satisfaction in dying. When one reflects that life after death would only be another birth, followed by old age and death, one loses all interest in being reborn at all. Existence itself becomes a source of great pain and torment. For such a person there is great joy in knowing that one has come to the end of existence at the end of the present life. This is the joy of nibbāna.

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16 Mūlinda-pañha, Book 3, chapter 4.
17 Mūlinda-pañha, Book 4, chapter 8.
Now a question arises that if Buddhism is not pluralistic in the sense of recognizing a variety of equally worthwhile ultimate goals, it could still be pluralistic in the sense of acknowledging that there are many equally effective methods/paths of arriving at the only one ultimate goal.

The Tevijja Sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya is the only sutta in the whole of the Pali literature which provides answer to this question. This sutta relates the story of a time when the Buddha was passing through Mānasakaṭa, where a number of Brahman teachers were also present. It so happens that two young Brahmans get into an argument on a question that which Brahman teacher teaches the only straight path (ayaṁ eva uju-maggo) that takes those who follow it to union with Brahmā (brahma-sahavyatā).

Neither of the young Brāhmans could convince the other with their answers. Ultimately they decided to go to the ascetic Gotama and ask the same. On reaching the place where the Buddha was, the young Brahmins explained the reason behind their coming to him. While explaining their problem the Brāhamins said that it is about what are and what are not paths (magga-amagga). They further explained that as per their understanding there are so many different paths taught by the different Brāhman teachers and they do not know which ones really lead to union with Brahmā and which do not. Whether all paths lead to this same goal in the same way that may different roads may all lead to the same village. On hearing their problem the Buddha asked the young Brāhmans whether among all the Brāhman teachers there is even one by whom Brahma has ever been experienced directly (sakki-diṭṭho).
The young Brāhmins replied that neither any living Brāhman teacher experienced Brahma directly, nor has any Brāhman within the past seven generations who has experienced Brahmā directly. Both of them even admit that none of the Vedic seers claimed to have experienced Brahmā directly. After hearing such replies to his questions, Lord Buddha concluded that what is said by the Vedic Brāhmans is unfounded (appatihirakataṁ). He went on saying that the Vedic Brāhmans are comparable to a chain of blind men, each holding on to the one before him, being lead by a man who is also blind. What are said by these Vedic Brāhmans, who talk about a goal that no one has ever achieved, are risible (hassaka), empty (rittaka) and vain (tucchaka). The sun and moon are visible and therefore everyone to see, says Gotama, and the Brahman teachers cannot find a way to achieve union even with these visible things, and yet they claim to be able to achieve union with something that no one has ever actually experienced.

The Vedic Brāhmans who speak of union with Brāhma have been compared in this sutta to a young man who sets forth to seek the most beautiful woman in the country, even though he has no idea what caste she belongs to, what her name is, what she looks like or where she lives. The Vedic Brāhmans are then compared to a man who plans to build a staircase for a palace at the crossroads and yet has no idea which direction the staircase will face, what it will look like or where the palace is located to which this staircase will be built. These Vedic Brāhmans are further compared to a man standing at a flooded river who tries to get to the other shore by calling across the water and inviting the other shore to come to him. The Brāhmans call on the Vedic gods to come to their service, not knowing that the gods will never come to the service of those who are attached to pleasures of the senses. Then they
are compared to a man standing at a flooded river who tries to get to the other shore despite the fact that he is bound by chains. The Brāhmans call on the Vedic gods to come to their service, says Gotama, not knowing that the gods will never come to the service of those who are bound by the chains of sensuality, ill-will, laziness, anxiety and doubt, who are encumbered with family and possessions, and who are impotent (avassavatti) owing to their lack of discipline. It is impossible that Brahmans such as this will see Brahma face to face either during the present life or after the breakup of the body. Therefore the knowledge contained in the Vedas is like a desert (Īrīṇa), a wilderness (vipina) or a wasteland (vyasana).

After listening to the Buddha’s depiction of the Vedic Brāhmans, the young Brahmanas then asked Gotama whether he has experienced Brahmā directly and can tell others how to experience him directly. He replied “I know Brahmā and the world of Brahmā, and the way to the world of Brahmā, and the path of practice whereby the world of Brāhma may be gained.” So the young Brāhmans asked Gotama to tell them the path that leads to the experience of union with Brahmā. The Buddha then took this opportunity to explain that the path to unity with Brahmā consists in renouncing the domestic life; it then consists in avoiding such conduct as killing, stealing, having sexual relations, lying, speaking maliciously, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, and speaking without a clear purpose. Moreover, one who aspires to know Brahmā avoids harming plants or seeds, eats only once a day, avoids entertainments and ornamented clothing, avoids luxury, accepts no precious metals, accepts no raw grains or meats, accepts no women or slaves as gifts, accepts no domesticated animals or fowl, accepts no farmland, avoids commercial transactions, refrains from bribery and
commits no violence. And such a person also practices meditation (jhāna). One who experiences Brahmā is one who cultivates friendship, compassion, sympathetic joy and impartiality towards every living thing, never favouring any person or group of persons or beings over any other. Gotama concluded in this sutta that it is only those who renounce family and possessions and devote themselves to the kind of conduct he has outlined who are capable of union with Brahmā. That renunciation of the sensual life and the subsequent pursuit of ethical purity is the only method that is effective in arriving at almost any desired goal is a point that is made in numerous passages of the Pali canon. In the Ambaṭṭhasutta of the Dīgha-nikāya, for example, the topic is what it that makes a person highly respected by the gods and by fellow human beings. Here the Buddha has been portrayed as explaining to the Brahman Ambaṭṭha that it is wisdom and righteousness that makes one the best among gods and human beings. Being highly ranked in divine and human society, it is explained, has nothing at all to do with birth or lineage or with the sort of pride that causes one to compare oneself with others. Talking of such things may be suitable when one is in the ordinary world looking for a suitable marriage partner, but talking of such things when one is looking for wisdom and proper conduct is wholly out of place. In fact, it is only by releasing oneself of such concerns, says the Buddha, that one can be in a position to seek wisdom. The Buddha then outlined his guidelines for good conduct almost exactly as in the Tevijja-sutta.

After outlining these guidelines, he pointed out that a servant of the king might overhear the king and then repeat the king’s words to others, but simply repeating what the king says would not make the servant himself a king; similarly, a wise man might repeat what wise men say, but just
repeating it does not make them wise. But many teachers do just that: repeat what genuinely wise people have taught. This is, for example, what Brahmans do in their repetition of the words of the great seers such as Aṭṭhaka, Vāmaka, Vāmadeva, Vessamitta, Yamataggi, Āṅgirasa, Bhrāradvāja, Vāsetṭha, Kassapa, and Bhāgu. Knowing the words of these great seers by heart hardly makes one a seer. These great seers did not parade around in white cloth with garlands on their bodies and perfume in their hair chanting memorized verses, nor did they live on the very finest of rice and beans and sauces, nor were they waited upon by the most beautiful of women clad in the finest of clothes, nor did they drive the finest of chariots and dwell in heavily guarded palaces full of riches as Brāhmans do. Brāhmans who simply recite the words of these poets and fail to live a life in imitation of them are not in any sense wise or righteous as the seers themselves were. As if to underline the point that memorizing the words of wise and pure people is not sufficient to make one wise and pure, the sutta narrates that when Ambaṭṭha returns to his teacher Pokkharasāti and tells him all that Gotama has told him, the teacher upbraids his disciple for being a simpleton and a dullard and assures him that he will be reborn in hell or in some animal state. The Brāhman teacher then kicks his unworthy disciple to the ground.

It is noteworthy that in the Tevijja-sutta there is no denial of the possibility of the Brāhmans’ stated goal of having direct experience with Brahmā; on the contrary, the Buddha himself claims to have had this experience. Rather, there is a denial that this experience can be had by those who do not seek it by the correct method. Moreover, there is nothing to suggest that this experience is on a par with what the Buddhists regard as the ultimate goal,
which is nibbāna, the attainment of which is usually proclaimed by the formula “Rebirth has been destroyed. The higher life has been fulfilled. What had to be done has been accomplished. After this present life there will be no beyond!”\(^{18}\) Having direct experience of Brahmā amounts only to being reborn in the realm of Brahma after the breakup of the present body, whereas when nibbāna is achieved there is no more rebirths into any realm. Nevertheless, even though the experience of Brahmā is not considered ultimate, it is still said to be available only to those who follow the same method as that which eventually leads to ultimate nibbāna. Similarly, in the Ambaṭṭhasutta it is said that while being highly regarded by gods and human beings is not an ultimate concern, it is nevertheless a goal that happens to be attained by those who follow the path that does lead ultimately to nibbāna.

The emphasis on the importance of renouncing the domestic life that one finds in the sutta-s, incidentally, is no longer to be found by the time of the Milinda-pañha.

In that text Nagasena makes it clear that it is possible for a person to attain nibbāna while still living at home, having a family, holding on to precious possessions, and using perfumes and adornments. Not only is it possible for a lay person to achieve the highest good, says Nagasena, but millions upon millions of people have achieved nibbāna without renouncing family, pleasures of the senses and possessions. In fact, he says, among those who have attained nibbāna, the vast majority have been lay persons who renounced nothing.

If it is possible for someone to attain nibbāna without being a monk and renouncing family and possessions, one might very well wonder what the point of becoming a monk is. As King Milinda asks, “If one can be cured without taking medicine, why take the medicine?” Nagasena’s reply to this sensible question is that by taking the vow to lead a life of utmost simplicity, one has the best possible chance of living a life that brings no harm to others and no death to others, even indirectly. One who lives a life of utmost simplicity can live without being a burden on others. Such a person can also live a life in which the causes of pride and all other forms of downfall are far removed.

Since monks own nothing, they have no fear of losing anything. Theirs is a life without complications and distractions in which it is very easy to live in moderation and to have time for reflection and meditation. Since they have nothing to protect, there is no temptation to be deceitful. And by living a life of utmost purity and simplicity they serve as a source of great inspiration to others. Therefore, not only do those who live a simple life make it easier for themselves to attain nibbāna, but they also encourage others to do the same.19 What these sutta-s lead one to conclude is that the Buddha takes the position that there is only one ultimate goal, nibbāna, and only one method of attaining it, the path of renunciation and good conduct. But while there is only one ultimate goal to which this path uniquely leads, the path does lead to a variety of other good in addition to the highest good.

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We have already discussed at some length in the passages above why the Buddha declined to give answers to a number of speculative questions about the origin and the size of the world and about life after death. The answers to such questions would have neither bearing on the reasons for human discontent nor on the steps that must be taken to remove that discontent. So the best that can be said is that, according to the teachings of classical Buddhism, doctrines concerning questions of cosmology, psychology and thanatology do no good in a person’s search for imperturbable mental freedom. But can the worst be said, namely, that according to classical Buddhism speculative doctrines actually do harm? If so, then it can also be said with confidence that classical Buddhism was no more pluralistic doctrinally than it was in other matters.

It has already been pointed out that answers to the question concerning life after death are seen in Buddhism as being rooted in wishful thinking. The person who fears death is naturally inclined to want to believe that there is life after death, whereas the person who fears the painful consequences of harmful actions is inclined to want to believe that there is no life after death. But the person who comes to realize that neither the body nor the mind is the self loses all such fears and hence loses the need to answer the question of whether or not there is life after death. Now the conclusion that can be drawn from this is that certain kinds of belief are said to be based on fears, and that fears are in turn based on identifying the body and mind as the self. But can the conclusion also be drawn that certain kinds of belief are said to reinforce and perpetuate the very fears upon which they are based? If this can be said, then it can be said that these beliefs are not at all regarded in
Buddhism as harmless and therefore are certainly not at all regarded as healthy.

In several places in the Pali canon there are reports of dialogues in which people ask the Buddha why it is that people believe that performing sacrifices and performing other kinds of religious ritual will lead to a better life in a world beyond the present one.

When asked about this matter, the Buddha gives two kinds of answer. The first kind of answer has to do with why people adopt certain beliefs. It is suggested, for example, that people do religious rituals because as they grow older, they cling to things as they were in the past and they begin to fear death; rituals are seen as a way of preserving the present order of things, even in a life beyond the death of the present body. For example, outlines such an answer to the question of why people do rituals, and it also warns that people who believe in rituals for this reason can never get beyond the realm of birth and death. The belief in the efficacy of rituals, in other words, impedes the attainment of nibbāna and so must be seen as harmful and not at all healthy.

The second kind of answer has to do with why people encourage their fellow human beings to adopt certain beliefs. It is suggested, for example, that Brahman males invented the belief in rituals for the purpose of making enough money to keep themselves surrounded by beautiful women, livestock, fine chariots and horses, and luxurious living quarters. In order to make money from these rituals, the Brahmans wrote hymns of praise to the gods and books of ritual performance, and they then convinced the wealthy and the powerful that they should sponsor the performance of sacrifices.

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20 Sutta-nipāta, 1043–1048.
When people came to believe in these sacrifices, then many hundreds of thousands of animals, who had never intentionally harmed anyone in any way, were mercilessly put to death under the sword, all for the sake of the Brahmans’ greed for money. This answer, which is outlined in the Sutta-nipāta\textsuperscript{21}, shows that, according to the Buddha, the belief in the efficacy of rituals not only leads to the unnecessary suffering and destruction of innocent beings but also reinforces the greed for sensual pleasure that impedes the attainment of nibbāna. So once again it can only be concluded that religious beliefs of this kind are regarded as harmful and not at all healthy.

It can be said in general that according to classical Buddhism, most religious doctrines arise either out of ignorance, or fear, or vested interests, or an unwillingness to face unpleasant realities. Religious doctrines, in other words, are seen as arising out of superficial thinking of the sort that accompanies the habit of identifying oneself with the body and mind. And having thus arisen, most religious doctrines are said to have the effect of supporting the survival of the very kind of dysfunctional thinking that gave rise to them in the first place. Such an attitude towards religious doctrines and their accompanied practices can hardly be called a form of religious pluralism, at least not in the sense that pluralism has been defined so far.

**Pluralism in Mahayana Teachings**

On the question of Buddhist attitudes towards religious pluralism, there is no significant change in the Sanskrit literature of Indian Buddhism from what

\textsuperscript{21} Sutta-nipāta, 299–315.
we have seen in the Pali literature. Vasubandhu, for example, declares in his Abhidharmakośa that nirvana is the ultimate good and therefore ultimately the only worthy goal, and he also declares that this ultimate freedom (moksha) is nowhere to be found outside of Buddhism, indeed, outside of the Abhidharma tradition of Buddhism. The reason that this is so is that all traditions aside from Buddhism are undermined by their belief that one has a self (ātman). So we see here a confirmation of the convictions found in Pali/Theravada Buddhism that

1) there is only one ultimate goal, namely, nirvāṇa,
2) there is only one outlook that is conducive to reaching that goal, namely, the belief that there is no self (anātmavāda), and
3) there is only one method of arriving at that view, namely, critical reflection (yoniso manasikāra), which may optionally be preceded by the practice of dhyāna, which consists in concentrating the attention on a single sensible object in order to abstract the attention from all other sensible objects.

Even in the Sanskrit literature that belongs to the movement that came to be called the Mahayana, there is no hint of a more pluralistic attitude. The ultimate goal in Mahayana literature is still nirvāṇa, and in the final analysis there is still no way to achieve that goal other than breaking the habit of identifying oneself with the body and the mind. There is to be sure a new emphasis in Mahayana literature on the ideal of the Bodhisattva, who is portrayed as a heroic figure who is prepared to postpone his own nirvāṇa until all other beings have been shown the way, but this new ideal only underlines the old Buddhist conviction that ultimately there is only one legitimate goal for all beings. There is in some Mahayana literature an
apparently new goal in the form of rebirth in a land of contentment (sukhāvatibhumi), but on close examination it turns out that this land of contentment is merely a place in which the environment is more conducive to the ultimate purpose of achieving nirvāṇa by the traditionally accepted method of overcoming all habits of identifying the self with the body or mind. There is no redefinition of the ultimate goal in Mahayana literature, nor is there any change in the notion of what must finally be done to achieve that goal.

Thus it could be concluded that the Buddhism uniformly lack the spirit of religious pluralism as pluralism is a distinctly modern ideology that, like all ideologies, has evolved to help people deal with the problems of a particular age in history. Therefore, to find truly pluralistic ideas in a literature as ancient as that of Buddhism is very difficult.

The relatively new ideology of religious pluralism has posed some problems for those who would also like to adhere to unreformed traditional religions, for the simple reason that very few of the major religious traditions have espoused the notion that more than one claim to ultimacy can be valid. On the contrary, most of the historical religions are based in some way either on an explicit rejection or denigration of another religious tradition or traditions or on aristocratic claims of ethnic or racial supremacy.

Now there arises a big question that if Buddhism does not believe in religious pluralism then how a Buddhist would behave with their co-religionists in the pluralistic situation of the modern world. In the following lines some examples from the Pali texts which seem to accept the pluralistic
situation of the world and also suggest how a true Buddhist should behave in such a situation have been dealt.

As mentioned in the previous pages during the time of Śakyamuni Buddha, there was once a layman who, originally a devotee of another religious tradition converted to Buddhism after meeting the Buddha. This layman was uncertain whether or not he could still make offerings to his original teacher.

This Upali, a man of wealth, who had decided not to continue his support of his old master, received the following instruction from the Buddha.

Not yet, not yet, not yet, Upali, your family has been well providing water for the Nikrons for a long, long time. You should consider it important to continue your alms-giving to them.²²

Upon hearing these words, this wealthy man Upali, becomes even more respectful of the Buddha and asks the Buddha to rest assured that he will treat his old master (and his followers) properly. In dealing with other competing religious masters, the Buddha’s approach clearly indicates a critical disagreement with their teachings and yet he remained tactfully compassionate in dealing with his opponents.

In fact, in the Sutra and Vinaya preached by the Buddha, the Buddha frequently praises the merit of making offerings not only to the Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, but also to other religious practitioners such as

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²² Quoted in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, *The Lord Buddha with Other Religions*, Bangkok: Sukhapab-jai Publisher, B.E. 2543, p. 111.
ascetics and Brahmans. So respecting other religions is a basic criterion for a Buddhist devotee. Therefore, Buddhists will not cause conflicts with followers of other religions, and will always get along with them peacefully, like good neighbors. In fact, in the various texts of Pali Tipiṭaka we find that the Buddha frequently praises the merit of making offerings not only to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, but also to other religious parishioners such as ascetics and Brāhmins. So respecting other religions is a basic criterion for a Buddhist devotee. Any religious practitioner who does not go against the basic moral principles of love, peace and pursuit of true happiness is worthy of approval regardless of his method of practice.

The Buddha advised his followers not to hurt or to cause injury to a Sramaṇa (monk) or a Brāhmin. Here he has recognized monks and Brāhmins as religious people. Again the Buddha said that when a person deceives a Brāhmin or a monk or pauper, by telling a lie, this is a cause of the downfall of the person. Thus in advising his followers in this manner the Buddha has treated people of all methods without any discrimination.

Buddhists have a non-attitude towards other religions, they recognize, unlike most of the dominant religions in the world today, that there are many overlapping paths to the same goal. If one starts from the knowledge that Buddhism is not actually a religion itself, and by looking deeper into Buddhist beliefs and practices, then their non-attitude towards other religions begins to become clear and understandable. There is no veneration or recognition of a single all powerful Divine Being or Creator God i.e., Iśwara. It is in fact the opposite, Buddhism seeks to reveal through specific

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23 Vide, *The Suttanipata*. 
mind, speech and body systematic practices; the true state of all beings as wholly responsible for the creation of their own realities.

In practice what this means is that Buddhism accepts all religions, all faiths, and all spiritual practices regardless. The goal of Buddhism is for the individual to understand the true nature of the mind and universe we live in, and by doing so come to a complete realization of that understanding, this is called enlightenment. Key to this is the individual, not the family, group, faith or society to which that person belongs to or believes in. Buddhism is focused on individual understanding rather than a communal one. In line with this Buddhism does not seek to recruit people to align them with their way of thinking. There are no Buddhist missionaries out and about trying to swell their ranks or convert people to their ways.

Buddhism does not in any way enforce their way as the only way; it is a fluid set of systems that allows for individual differences of belief and opinion. Paramount to Buddhism is the belief and practice of, No Harm to yourself or other's; as a result there has never been a battle, war or crusade fought in the name of Buddhism, ever. To become a Buddhist one must go to them, and this is in line with Buddha's teachings that; we all walk our eternal paths alone; no one can save one but oneself. Combined with a complete tolerance that is inherent in his teachings, meaning you can worship whomever you want to in addition to being a Buddhist. During his lifetime the Buddha actually opposed any images or sculptures being made or venerated that portrayed his personage. He was also proponent of a non-hierarchical spiritual Saṅgha, in which all were equal and those who had gained an understanding
Because of Buddhism's fluidity as it spread throughout the world it encompassed many local beliefs and mythologies, but unlike the Catholic Church, it never claimed them, nor changed them into Buddhist only doctrine when it did so. As a result, especially in Tibetan Buddhism, there are whole pantheons of local mythologies that have been perfectly preserved within their original templates. It was customary for Buddhist monks to translate Buddha's teaching into their most understandable form specific to local regions. In so doing the local people would gain a better understanding of Buddhism from within their established traditional mythologies and systems of belief. Utmost respect was given to these beliefs and they were never denigrated, disregarded or discarded, as being inferior to Buddhism. In Tibetan Buddhism this can be evidenced by the Bodhisattvas; Chenrezi and the Green, White and Red Tara's.