CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The present global world is a place of radical plurality – plurality of religion, belief, ethnicity, culture, economic status, political affiliation, sexuality and so on and so forth. How to manage this plurality and these factors of differences is a major challenge for the world community. We find that the contemporary world societies are plagued by numerous inter-religious conflicts and clashes and even fierce warfare with deadly hatred. Sometimes these fierce currents are covert and seething beneath the surface of society in a multi-racial or multi-religious nation. Sometime it is violently manifested as in present day India, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Ireland etc., to mention but a few of such centers of conflict where religion apparently forms the basis of such clashes. This is an irony and a blot on the true religious spirit, which are Love, Brotherhood and Unity in the Divine Spirit.

What sorts of insights Buddhism offers to this? Buddhism as we know it today began in the fifth century BC with a twenty nine year old, Siddhartha Gautama, leaving an aristocratic home in North-East India to become an itinerant religious searcher and preacher. According to traditions, he became a Buddha – one who had awoken to the truth that upholds the cosmos – after six years of exploration. He taught this truth for about forty five years, forming around him a fourfold community of laymen, lay women, monks and nuns. He died at an advanced age surrounded by loving disciples, having created a movement that was to spread throughout Northern India, Central Asia and far beyond. Here a
pertinent question arises that what he taught to the contemporary people has something to offer to modern world? Buddhists would say it has, for two main reasons: firstly, the context of India in the fifth century BC was not completely unlike the twenty first century; and secondly, the teachings of the Buddha transcends the particular situation/time and can address the human condition in a given situation or time.

Buddhism was successful in India because it offered something for the whole of society. Not only did the Buddha call upon people to leave their families to follow him as celibate members of an Order, he also advised rulers and inspired many who remained deeply involved in family life. He did this against a backdrop of growing urbanization, economic change and a plethora of competing beliefs and ideologies. Those who left their homes to follow him had to compete for lay patronage in a market-place of religious practices and political affiliations. It is also clear from the earliest Buddhist text, the Theravada Buddhist canon, that there was violence in the Buddhist India. The aristocratically-born Buddha is seen as an adviser to kings and political leaders, in times of war and conflict, criminality, poverty etc. At one level, this may seem a world away from twenty first century world. But, when we confront with cases of anti-social behavior, communal violence, ethnic disparities, inter-religious conflicts and clashes, religious dogmatism and such other inhuman activities in modern world we would say that the teachings of the Buddha have as much to say to this situation as to the fifth-sixth century BC.
In the Brahmajāla Sutta\(^1\) of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Buddha is recorded as stating that the teachings of other sects of his day were based on one or more of 62 erroneous theories, and that falling into those errors would prevent attaining permanent liberation from suffering:

Bhikkhu-s, there are countless philosophies, doctrines, and theories in this world. People criticize each other and argue endlessly over their theories. According to my investigation, there are sixty-two main theories which underlie the thousands of philosophies and religions current in our world. Looked at from the Way of Enlightenment and Emancipation, all sixty-two of these theories contain errors and create obstacles... A good fisherman places his net in the water and catches all the shrimp and fish he can. As he watches the creatures try to leap out of the net, he tells them, ‘No matter how high you jump, you will only land in the net again.’ He is correct. The thousands of beliefs flourishing at present can all be found in the net of these sixty-two theories. Bhikkhu-s, don’t fall into that bewitching net. You will only waste time and lose your chance to practice the Way of Enlightenment.\(^2\)

Again in the Tevijja Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya, we see the Buddha’s response to the question whether there is one path or many different paths (leading to salvation). In response to this question Buddha said that:

\(^{1}\) *Brahmajāla Sutta*, retrieved 2009-06-18.

Concerning the true path and the false, Gotama. Various Brahmans, Gotama, teach various paths. The Addhariya Brāhmans, the Tāittiriya Brāhmaṇ-s, the Khaṇḍoka Brāhmaṇ-s (the Khaṇḍava Brāhmaṇ-s), the Bavharija Brāhmaṇ-s. Are all those saving paths? Are they all paths which will lead him, who acts according to them, into a state of union with Brahmā?

Just, Gotama, as near a village or a town there are many and various paths, yet they all meet together in the village—just in that way are all the various paths taught by various Brahmans ... Are all these saving paths? Are they all paths which will lead him, who acts according to them, into a state of union with Brahma?

According to the summary of a leading Buddhist scholar, K.N. Jayatilleke, the rest of the account is as follows:

The Buddha, who, has held this office (of Brahmā) in the past and has verified in the light of his extra-sensory powers of perception the conditions required for attaining fellowship with God or Brahmā, could state that there are not a diversity of paths all leading to such a state but one and only one path consisting of acquiring purity of mind, cultivating compassion and being selfless and without possessions.

David Chappell indicates that the question of Buddhist pluralism is quite

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complicated, both in the Buddhist attitudes toward other religions, as well as its attitudes toward different Buddhism within its own historical development. According to Chappell, there are at least six different Buddhist attitudes toward other religious traditions:

1) Buddhism has been separate and superior to other religions.
2) Buddhism has been compassionately engaged with other religions.
3) Other religions are early stages of development toward Buddhist goals.
4) Buddhism and other religions are complementary.
5) All religions are historically relative and limited.
6) Buddhism and other religions share the same essence.

If it is perused, it could be argued that the first three attitudes would deny the feasibility of religious pluralism from the Buddhist perspective. As there is only ‘one path’, which is superior to all others, Buddhism sees other religions as immature or developing at an earlier stage. By implication, other religions would ultimately develop into an appreciation or acceptance of the Buddhist truth. Attitudes four to six, by contrast, imply an acceptance of religious pluralism. If other religions are complementary, it means they are different without the need for a shared essence. On the other hand, if all religions share the same essence, then an appreciation of religious pluralism at the conventional level can be accepted. This last attitude toward other religions outlined above could face the same criticisms leveled against Hick’s religious pluralism in the sense that, if pluralism is not at least assumed at the ‘ultimate’ level, then it is not really religious pluralism.
Sincere efforts are being made by the different faith groups, organizations and individuals, throughout the world, to diffuse the tensions among the co-religionists by means of interfaith dialogues, meetings, symposiums, conferences etc. For a Buddhist, his or her faith is no bar to dialogue with other religions. The reason is that Buddhism is not a system of dogmas. The Buddha exhorted his disciples to take nothing on blind faith, not even his words. Rather, they should listen, and then examine the teachings for themselves, so that they might be convinced of its truth.\textsuperscript{4} Once, when the Buddha was visiting a market town called Kesaputta, the local people, known as the Kalamas, sought his advice. Wandering ascetics and teachers used to visit the town from time to time, and were not reticent about propagating their own particular religious and philosophical doctrines, and at the same time disparaging the teaching of others. The Buddha advised them in this way:

\begin{quote}
It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain ... Do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Do not be led by the authority of religious text, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, Nor by delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea, “This ascetic is our teacher.” But rather, when you yourselves know [that] certain things are unwholesome and wrong, [that such] things are censured by the wise, and when undertaken, such things lead to harm, [then] abandon them. And when you yourselves know [that] certain things are unwholesome and
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good, [that such] things are approved by the wise, and when undertaken such things lead to benefit and happiness, [then] enter on and abide in them.  

What the Buddha’s teaching offers, then, is an intellectual and spiritual ‘crutch’, which we may use until we are able to tread the path to liberation and Enlightenment alone. While the teachings of the other religions do have much in common with Buddhism, the latter is unique in its emphasis on this point. As the Buddha put it –

“One is indeed, one’s own savior, for what other savior could there be?
When one is in control of oneself, one obtains a savior difficult to find.”

The Buddha compared his doctrine, the Dhamma, to a raft which one uses to cross over a lake or stream, but is left behind when one reaches shore. It would make no sense to continue lugging the raft about, once it had served its purpose. So attachment to doctrine for its own sake, be it religious, political, or ideological, is illogical from a Buddhist point of view. It follows then, that a Buddhist need not fear “losing” his faith by coming into contact with the faiths of others.

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6 “Aṭṭha hi attano nātho ko hi nātho paro sīvā.
Atanā’ va sudāntena nāthaṁ labhati dullabhaṁ.” *Dhammapada*, 12:4.

For a particularly good translation of this work, see *The Dhammapada: Pali Text and Translations with Stories in Brief and Notes*, Trans. Narada Thera (Kuala Lumpur: The Buddhist Missionary Society, 1874), p. 145.

In Buddhism, virtuous conduct (sīla) includes “right speech” (sammā-vācā). And by practicing the virtue of right speech in the context of dialogue, we will be setting an example for the larger community, even before it becomes formal. The many problems which beset our communities, indeed all mankind, at the close of this century are articulated in the political forum - the environment, nuclear proliferation, international terrorism, human rights, urban violence, social justice, and the like.

When we look towards the happenings in the present world, we are reminded of the words of the Buddha:

“Yo appaduṭṭhassa narassa dussati suddhassa posassa anaṅgaṇassa. Tameva bālam pacceti pāpaṁ sukkhumo rajo pativatam’ va khitto”\(^8\) (“Whoever harms a harmless person, one pure and guiltless, upon that very fool the evil recoils like a fine dust thrown against the wind”)

At another place we find that the Buddha tells his monks that “even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching.”\(^9\)

Keeping in mind the present day crises we need to engage ourselves in dialogues with the persons of other religious denominations. The only

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\(^8\) *Dhammapada*, 9:10.  
alternative to talk is the build up of resentment and anger, which in time must inevitably become open hostility and conflict. Nor can religions take the attitude that they will start talking, when they have “settled scores.” As the Buddha reminds us, “in those who harbor such thoughts as ‘he abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me,’ hatred is not appeased.” In an often-quoted verse he further states that “hatreds never cease through hatred in this world, through love alone do they cease. This is an eternal law.”

When we appeal the followers of different religions to have a dialogue among them, the questions arise that – will such types of inter-religious dialogues help in bringing harmonious relationship among them or result into bitterness? Do we have any example of having an experiment of such things in the history of mankind? In answer to the first question we have to be optimistic. So far as the answer to second question is concerned, we do find the example of the Mauryan King Asoka who had such experiments and was successful in bringing peace and prosperity in his kingdom.

Asoka (c. 272-231 BC), Mauryan Emperor is said to have converted to Buddhism after a particularly bloody imperial campaign. From that point onwards, in an almost fatherly way according to the tradition, he sought to teach his subjects in how to live in harmony with one another, in spite of their differences. He did this through sending officers throughout his

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10 “Akkocchi maṁ avadhi maṁ ajīni maṁ ahāsi me; ye taṁ upanayhanti verarī tersaṁ na sammati.” Dhammapada, 1:3.

11 “Na hi verena verāni sammanā dha kudācancaṁ; averenca ca sammanī esa dhammo sanantano.” Ibid, 1:5.
kingdom to propagate religion, and also through rock and pillar edicts (where he is named King Piyadassi). No reference is made in these edicts to the technical aspects of Buddhism. Their focus is morality and a code of conduct. One of the major rock edicts concerns relationships between religions and beliefs, and contains these words:

“But beloved of the Gods, King Piyadassi, does not value gifts and honors as much as he values this – that there should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is not praising one’s own religion or condemning the religions of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mid way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one’s own religion benefits and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one’s own religion and the religions of others.”

This edict goes back to the Buddha who, in a context where acrimonious exchanges took place between different religious groups, encouraged his followers not to feel ill-will when other groups criticized them, but to engage in dialogue, pointing out misunderstandings with reason and courtesy.

A Buddhist code of conduct for a pluralistic would stress courtesy, respect and willingness to engage in dialogue where differences between people become acrimonious. A realism that can be found at the heart of Buddhism informs this. The Buddha originally attracted followers by inviting them to come and see if his teachings worked; to see if they actually led to the decrease of suffering and bring harmony. On the evidence we have, the Buddha was concerned about what worked, about what could be valued empirically. He sometimes avoided dogmatic statements because of this. It is empirically obvious that a society will be more harmonious if people of different world-views or from different cultural backgrounds listen to one another with respect and courtesy; if people feel valued and affirmed.