

How can Buddhism Become A Universal Religion?

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SUCH a question is presumptuous because Buddhism is already a world religion, both in the sense that its proponents advocate that it is available to all and in the sense that it not only has more adherents than any other religion, except perhaps Christianity, but also already appeals to some persons in most countries of the world.

But I have a different question in mind. As rapid increases in speedy transportation and communication aid in making people all over the world intricately more interdependent and in more frequent contact, the need for intercultural and interreligious ecumenism grows. Despite the desirability of maintaining each of the world's major cultures and religions, there is a growing need for a world culture in which people can share increasingly because it contains minimums of common cultural, including religious, ideals. Although it is too early to say whether mankind will ever reach a verbal consensus about human ideals, nevertheless it is not too early to notice that, unless we fool ourselves again, no doctrine can become genuinely universal which does not appeal to something fundamental in human nature. When the historically great religions compete with each other, and with newly emerging movements, for allegiance by tomorrow's youth all over the world, those doctrines which provide continuing insight into fundamental, hence universal, needs of human beings should have the greatest chance of survival.

Hence, when fresh minds challenge the teachings of their predecessors and demand demonstration of their practical relevance to megalopolitan and global living, teachers who concentrate upon the enduringly practical truths of their religion, and who are willing to abandon, except as jewels in their historical museum, doctrines which have ceased to be relevant, are the ones who will succeed. Thus, when faced with the on-rushing challenges of "secularism," of discontented youth, of enormous gains in scientific psychiatry, of other adapting religions, and of newly-created and increasingly-creative religions, teachers of traditional religions do well to select more deliberately from their stock of eulogized doctrines those which can be expected to have genuinely universal appeal.

Since, as I believe, Buddhism has some such doctrines, it can become a much

more universal religion, or contribute an enduring share to some world religion, if its teachers focus their efforts, not only in dealing with non-members but also in nursing youthful members who inevitably will become exposed to pervasive challenges, upon those ideas which all can share most easily.

I will limit my remarks to one doctrine and one practice.

The Buddhist doctrine which appears to me to have the most universal appeal is that which I attribute to Gotama himself. It consists in a simple psychological principle: "Desire for what will not be attained ends in frustration; therefore, to avoid frustration, avoid desiring what will not be attained." (See my *Philosophy of the Buddha*, Harper and Brothers, 1958; Collier Books, 1962; Capricorn Books, 1969; for dialectical details.) Here is a principle which is intuitively obvious, and immediately acceptable by all who hear it a first time. That we all fail to practice it, and all suffer from such failure ("All is suffering."), is also obvious upon little reflection. If this is Buddhist doctrine, then we are all latent Buddhists whether we know it or not. Calling attention to this doctrine benefits mankind. Calling attention to it as Buddhistic converts men to Buddhism. Hence, one way to increase the universality of Buddhism is to help make more people acquainted with this principle and its Buddhistic origin.

A well-known Buddhist practice, which yields beneficial results so efficiently, so transparently, and so persistently, is "living in Zen." By this I mean willingly maintaining an attitude of yea-saying to events as they occur. Yea-saying may exist at many psychological levels. One may easily say yes to praise, to salary raise, to sunny days. But by accepting the doctrine that the present world is the only actual one and that failure to appreciatively enjoy its presence now is to waste it forever, one may also say yes to being despised, to unexpected expenses, and to a bitter rain. Although dialectical subtleties appear as psychological difficulties, one can teach by example the obvious superiority of spontaneously responding with a deep-seated attitude of yea-saying to present situations within which evils that appear must be rejected and rejected decisively. That is, one can say yes to a situation in which he is required to say no.

Zen practice, in the sense intended above, appears to me to be an embodiment of Gotama's doctrine, mentioned above. It requires no mysterious or laborious methods of introduction (e.g., *ko-ans*, or years of monastic servitude). People often fall into it naturally when they achieve a high level of mastery over skills of any kind. A teacher need merely call attention to the existence of the attitude of yea-saying already embodied in a person enjoying his exercising such mastery, and point out both its religious quality and how nice life would be if one could carry the same attitude over into the rest of his life.

HOW CAN BUDDHISM BECOME A UNIVERSAL RELIGION?

Teachers who seek to introduce novices to Buddhism by indicating ways in which they already believe Buddhist doctrines and already enjoy engaging in Buddhist practices convert them more easily than by seeking to arouse interest in what is unfamiliar. After assenting to some doctrines and practices as Buddhistic, persons naturally become more curious about other Buddhist doctrines and tend to be led by their own curiosity to explore further.

On the other hand, when teachers introduce Buddhism either by eulogizing its mysteriousness, profundity or even occultness or by baffling beginners with seemingly irrational paradoxes, whether intellectual (such as the doctrine of the ultimacy of absolute nothingness) or practical (such as *ko-an*), they may expect not only resistance but dismay and rejection. It is true that, once aroused, many persons are overcome, as I am, by an almost irresistible quest for final answers. So inquiry into profounder questions, such as "Do we originate from something or from nothing?" may follow naturally. But it seems to me that the probability of Buddhism becoming a more universally accepted religion will diminish to the extent that proponents emphasize doctrines and practices which lack universal appeal. The test of such appeal, obviously, is the pragmatic one: try introducing different doctrines to persons from different cultures and observe which do and which do not have immediate appeal; then concentrate upon those which do and neglect those which do not. If teachers insist on teaching doctrines which lack appeal, then Buddhism is less likely to become a universal religion, whereas if they themselves can say yes to the obvious superiority of focusing upon those which appeal automatically, then the prospects of Buddhism becoming a universal religion are greatly improved.