

Is Buddhism a Religion?

As edited by
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Narada Maha Thera in *The Buddha and His Teachings* (1998) addresses the question of whether Buddhism is a religion:

The Venerable Narada Maha Thera begins by quoting Prof. Rhys Davids who asks the question:

“What is meant by religion? The word, as is well-known is not found in languages not related to our own, and its derivation is uncertain. Cicero, in one passage, derived it from *re* and *lego*, and held that its real meaning was the repetition of prayers and incantations. Another interpretation derives the word from *re* and *logo*, and makes its original sense that of attachment, of a continual binding (that is, no doubt to the gods). A third derivation connects the word with *lex*, and explains it as a law-abiding, scrupulously conscientious frame of mind.”
(Narada 210)

Venerable Narada Maha Thera continues,

“Buddhism is not strictly a '*religion*' in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, for it is not '*a system of faith and worship*,' owing any allegiance to a supernatural God. Buddhism does not demand blind faith from its adherents. Hence mere belief is dethroned and for it is substituted '*confidence based on knowledge*.' It is possible for a Buddhist to entertain occasional doubts until he attains the first stage of Sainthood (Sotāpatti) when all doubts about the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha are completely resolved. One becomes a genuine follower of the Buddha only after attaining this stage.

“The confidence of a follower of the Buddha is like that of a patient in respect of a noted physician, or of a student regarding his teacher. Although a Buddhist seeks refuge in the Buddha as his incomparable guide and teacher who indicates the Path of Purity, he makes no servile surrender.

“A Buddhist does not think that he can gain purity merely by seeking refuge in the Buddha or by mere faith in Him. It is not within the power even of a Buddha to wash away the impurities of others. Strictly speaking, one can neither purify nor defile another. The Buddha, as Teacher, may be instrumental, but we ourselves are responsible for our purification.

In the Dhammapada the Buddha says:

*“By, oneself alone is evil done: by oneself is one defiled.
By oneself alone is evil avoided: by oneself alone is one purified.
Purity and impurity depend on oneself: No one can purify another.”*
(v.145).

“A Buddhist is not a slave to a book or to any individual. Nor does he sacrifice his freedom of thought by becoming a follower of the Buddha. He is at full liberty to exercise his own freewill and develop his knowledge even to the extent of attaining Buddhahood himself, for all are potential Buddhas. Naturally Buddhists quote the Buddha as their authority, but the Buddha Himself discarded all authority.

“Immediate realization is the sole criterion of truth in Buddhism. Its keynote is rational understanding (*Sammāditthi*). The Buddha advises seekers of truth not to accept anything merely on the authority of another but to exercise their own reasoning and judge for themselves whether a thing is right or wrong.

“On one occasion the citizens of Kesaputta, known as *Kālāmas*,

approached the Buddha and said that many ascetics and brahmins who came to preach to them used to exalt their own doctrines and denounce those of others, and that they were at a loss to understand which of those worthies were right. (Narada 212)

“Yes, O Kālāmas, it is right for you to doubt, it is right for you to waver. In a doubtful matter, wavering has arisen,” remarked the Buddha and gave them the following advice which applies with equal force to modern rationalists as it did to those sceptic brahmins of yore.

“Come, O Kālāmas, Do not accept anything on mere hearsay (i.e., thinking that thus have we heard it from a long time). Do not accept anything by mere tradition (i.e., thinking that it has thus been handed down through many generations). Do not accept anything on account of rumours (i.e., by believing what others say without any investigation). Do not accept anything just because it accords with your scriptures. Do not accept anything by mere supposition. Do not accept anything by mere inference. Do not accept anything by merely considering the appearances. Do not accept anything merely because it agrees with your preconceived notions. Do not accept anything merely because it seems acceptable (i.e., should be accepted). Do not accept anything thinking that the ascetic is respected by us (and therefore it is right to accept his word.)

“But when you know for yourselves – these things are immoral, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to ruin and sorrow – then indeed do you reject them.

“When you know for yourselves – these things are moral, these things are blameless, these things are praised by the wise, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to well-being and

happiness – then do you live and act accordingly.”

(Anguttara Nikāya vol. i, p. 189; Kindred Sayings, part i, pp. 171, 172.)

“These wise sayings of the Buddha, uttered some 2,500 years ago, still retain their original force and freshness even in this enlightened twentieth century. With a homely illustration *Jnānasāra-samuccaya* repeats the same counsel in different words.

*“Tāpāc chedāc ca nikasat svarnam iva panditaih
Parikshya blikshavo grāhyam madvaco na tu gauravāt”.*

*“As the wise test gold by burning, cutting and rubbing it
(on a piece of touchstone), so are you to accept my words
after examining them and not merely out of regard for me.”*

“The Buddha exhorted His disciples to seek the truth, and not to heed mere persuasion even by superior authority.” (Narada 213-214)

“... Just before the Buddha passed away, many disciples came to pay their respects to Him. One Bhikkhu, however, remained in his cell absorbed in meditation. This matter was reported to the Buddha who summoned him and, on enquiring the reason for his absence, was told: 'Lord, I knew that Your Reverence would pass away three months hence, and I thought the best way of honouring the Teacher was by attaining Arahantship even before the decease of Your Reverence.'

“The Buddha extolled the praiseworthy conduct of that loyal and dutiful Bhikkhu, saying: 'Excellent, excellent! He who loves me should emulate this Bhikkhu. He honours me best who practises my teaching best.’” *(Buddhist Legends, vol. 3. pp. 249, 250)*

Reference

Narada Maha Thera. 1998. *The Buddha and His Teachings*.
Taipei: The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation.