

BUDDHISM A RELIGION? NO WAY!

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Well, “no way” as I see it. Buddhism is said to be one of the fastest-growing religions in America. In my opinion this is because Buddhism is not really a religion at all as folks who study it well know. I never thought it was and I have been working with it for over 37 years. If you must call it a religion, then it is the “religion” for the rest of us. If it is not a religion, what is it?

Buddhism is just what the Buddha himself said it was, a method or way to greater awareness; let’s call it a path. Sure, some folks have mystified it and others have tried to make it theistic and all the other things that most religions are. What’s new? But I have checked it out and as far as I can tell it’s not that. The dharma is essentially just a path, call it the “middle way” or middle path, whatever. It is simply a method to become more aware. Does it address what happens after death and things like that? Yes it does and we will get to that in another blog.

The historical Buddha was not a god anymore (or any less) than you and I are gods. He never claimed to be. He died like we all will die or as the great Tibetan lama Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was said at a teaching to his audience: “Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later.”

What the Buddha taught and what he left to us is what is called the “dharma,” which is his method or technique for becoming more aware and perhaps eventually enlightened. That’s it. He never acted like a god, did not walk on water, or make any such claims. He was not able to touch someone’s forehead and enlighten them. He made it clear that each one of us would have to enlighten ourselves. The Buddha simply pointed out a way or method through which we can increase our awareness. The word “Buddha” comes from a Sanskrit word for “aware.”

And the Buddha did not speak to us of other worlds. His message was about how to cope with this world, how to handle our own suffering, and how to benefit other beings in the process. That’s pretty much it. The dharma is all about the here and the now, and not the “there,” “then,” or “when.”

I am not a church goer and I have said this before in other blogs. Going to church for an hour or two once a week will never save me for heaven. I need a stronger dose of something. More important I need a method. General faith and prayer (not to knock them) is not going to be enough. I need a detailed plan, a step-by-step path or way to get from here to a more aware “me.” I need those twelve steps and I find that the dharma provides them.

If I have to come up with a label for what Buddhism is, it would be more like a “psychology,” a psychological method for learning about our own mind. Buddhism is about training the mind, gaining some control over our own self and our emotions, at least enough to live a decent life and not harm others.

Buddhism is like Aikido (passive) and not like Judo (aggressive). Buddhists try very hard not to harm other beings and to be responsible for their own mental and emotional footprints.

Yes, Buddhists burn candles and incense like the rest of us, but don’t confuse the trappings with the essence. At heart Buddhism is about training the mind to be more aware and mindful. The

Buddhist path or method involves examining our own mind in sitting meditation for starters, but that is not the end of it.

The end result of Buddhism is not to sit in a corner and meditate, but to learn to meditate until we get to know our own mind well enough to work with it and exercise some self-control. The product of meditation (in the short term) is not found on the cushion, but eventually off the cushion in the rest of our life, living mindfully, getting things done, not harming others, and gradually becoming more enlightened.

Does Buddhism have a spiritual component? It does, and I will tiptoe into that in another blog.