

The Buddha's 7 challenges to interreligious dialogue

Excerpt from *Handbook of Meditation in Society 6:*

Sutta Discovery 60.1f: A psychopathology of mindfulness © Piya Tan 2023c (forthcoming).

5.5.5.0 The Udumbarikā Siha, nāda Sutta contains one of the most important statements on **Buddhist missiology**, that is, the Buddha's 7 points of interreligious dialogue, listed near the end of the Sutta, as follows:¹

- (1) "Let whoever is your teacher (*ācariya*) remain as your teacher."
- (2) "Let your training (*uddesa*) remain as your training."
- (3) "Let your livelihood (*ājīva*) remain as your livelihood."
- (4) "Let what you consider unwholesome (*akusala*) continue to be so considered."
- (5) "Let what you consider wholesome (*kusala*) continue to be so considered."
- (6) "There are unwholesome states" not yet abandoned, that conduce to **rebirth and suffering**.
- (7) "By your own insight and realization, you will attain **the fullness of wisdom**."

(D 25,23), SD 1.4

The first 5 points are universal qualities that keep us civilized as social beings, that keep us **human**, and even rise into **divinity**; the last 2 are spiritual imperatives that compel us to rise above both our humanity and divinity, to awaken to true reality. As we have already discussed these 7 statements of the Buddha in some detail elsewhere, we will here only make a brief note of each, as follows:²

5.5.5.1 "Let whoever is your teacher (*ācariya*) remain as your teacher."

In practising Buddha Dharma, we enlarge our spiritual family and community in a wholesome way. We continue to befriend our old teachers, and continue to support them, if necessary. We gently show them we are happier now, partly because of them (they were like bridges who have brought us thus far).

5.5.5.2 "Let your training [routine] (*uddesa*) remain as your training."

Our old religions and cultures have certain wholesome ways that are worth keeping, so long as they do not negatively affect our present lives. Indeed, some of these old teachings were there because of past conditions; our present conditions are open with happiness and clear with wisdom.

5.5.5.3 "Let your livelihood (*ājīva*) remain as your livelihood."

Our lifestyle and occupation can remain as they are so long as we do not break any of the 5 precepts. When we do have difficulties with them, we will work in preparation for a more Dharma-spirited way of life, guided by respect for life, health and happiness, freedom, truthfulness and wisdom.

¹ For an interpretation in the context of *papañca*, see SD 19.1 (7.3 f).

² On interreligious dialogue, see **Udumbarikā Siha, nāda S** (D 25,23) & SD 1.4 (1.2, 2).

5.5.5.4 “Let what you consider unwholesome (*akusala*) continue to be so considered.”

Even in Buddhism as a religion we will see aspects of it which were added later, reflecting culture, foreign influences and misunderstanding of the teachings. We should not follow wrong practices such as worshipping the dead or “transferring merits” to them (but remember them with lovingkindness), relying on luck, such as gambling (but rely on good and honest work and savings).

5.5.5.5 “Let what you consider wholesome (*kusala*) continue to be so considered.”

One of most wholesome qualities of religions is in its fellowship. We should continue to be close (or closer) to our family and relatives, and celebrate life with them. We should treat those we are familiar with (old friends and good neighbours) like relatives, and keep our home open to them, especially on special occasions.

5.5.5.6 “There are unwholesome states not yet abandoned, that conduce to *rebirth* and *suffering*.”

Religion should not be merely about beliefs, conversion or numbers but about right and good living—about respecting life and giving it the best conditions to develop. If we feel that we are not ready to give up our old religion, we don't have to; we should keep to its wholesome aspects like showing kindness and generosity. The Dharma of true reality and true happiness will naturally find their right place in our open mind and warm heart.

5.5.5.7 “By your own insight and realization, you will attain *the fullness of wisdom*.”

The key spirit in the Buddha's teaching is “self-reliant learning” (*atta,dīpa*), being an “island” unto oneself in the world's floods. This is just the opposite of being insular, but we try to be always ready to reach out to others or receive them in times of need. This is easier said than done since the floods keep rising. This means that we just have to keep on learning to be safe from the floods.

As we learn to work with others, we will discover that, despite being islands, when the floods have receded, we are all **mountains** in our own way. We are all interconnected with one another by Mother Earth and Father Sun. Thus, we reflect why the Buddha is called the “kinsman of the Sun” (*ādicca,bandhu*).³ The Earth supports us, the Sun energizes us, the Buddha awakens us. We begin by learning what we stand on, what is above us, what is beyond earth and sky. Everything is growing and turning; there is this true peace called nirvana.

5.5.5.8 When we participate in a living dialogue it means that we do care about our own religion or faith. Although we may speak *for* our community, it is *how* we speak as an individual that helps us project a good image of our community. Often, as speakers in an interreligious dialogue, we deeply wish that the situation in our own community would be better. Indeed, we can only speak as if our community is true to the faith and to one another.

But much of what we express may either falsely impress others with the prosperity of our community or inspire them with our honesty and courage—which we badly need today. In such a dialogue we are very likely to speak of ideal states rather than current realities.

³ V 2:296,17; D 2:287,21*; Sn 54, 915; Tha 26.

While we present the face of our faith before others, we hope that our words will also set things right in our own religious community.

The Sama,jīvi Sutta 1 (A 4.55) records the Buddha as instructing the loving couple Nakula,pitā and Nakula,mātā that following 4 qualities keeps us together here and in future lives. These same 4 qualities, extended to our community as a whole, would surely keep us together happily here and hereafter, that is, **the 4 qualities of compatible community**:⁴

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|------------------------|---------------------|
| (1) harmonious faith | <i>sama,saddhā</i> |
| (2) harmonious virtue | <i>sama,sīlā</i> |
| (3) harmonious charity | <i>sama,cāgā</i> |
| (4) harmonious wisdom | <i>sama,paññā</i> . |

One very effective way to promote these 4 qualities in our own Buddhist community is to have **intra-Buddhist dialogues**, where learned and experienced members of our own community sit in dialogue on these 4 qualities for the benefit of the assembled members of the community. Currently, Buddhism, despite being a global religion—perhaps *because* it is a globalized religion—that fiercely refuses to bow to any central authority, is fast becoming a DIY religion, heading towards either a Buddhist anarchy or anomie.

Within the last decade, with the rise of the Internet, we are beginning to see intrepid Buddhist zealots, priestly and lay, openly claiming to be *streamwinners, once-returners, non-returners*, even *arhats*. They are not the only ones doing so. In Myanmar, individual meditators in a Buddhist organization have been officially classified into the categories of path saints according to the religious benchmarks of the organization. This is what we will look at next.

To better understand the next section, you are advised to be familiar with the nature of **the Buddhist path** (*magga*) and the 10 fetters (*samyojana*) [5.1.1] first. We will next make analytical studies of journal papers by specialists and scholars in their attempt to make some kind of quantitative as well as qualitative studies of meditation efforts and individual meditators by selected Buddhist participants and informants.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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⁴ A 4.55/2:62 f (SD 5.1).