

**Buddhism within Religious Education:
What Is It? What Should It Be?**

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INTRODUCTION:

I am very pleased to be here, and honoured to speak to such a distinguished gathering about something so precious to me as the teachings of Lord Buddha.

In what I am going to say over the next forty minutes, I have had to make some assumptions.

I have assumed that everyone here knows at least the basics of Buddhism, and that you are interested in Buddhism, or at least interested enough to come and spend an hour from your precious human life to come and listen to a complete stranger, who could be very boring. So, I will do the best I can to give you a 'good taste' of what the Buddha taught, as I have understood it from what I been taught, and hopefully you will be awake at the end when you can ask some questions.

Also what I say should be taken in the context of the current world situation with another war in the Gulf over territory and oil. I have been astounded by the number of seemingly intelligent people who seem to believe that a 'war on terror' can ever lead to peace. Killing people always leads to more killings, and thousands of innocent people have already died. Religion promises eternal salvation not carpet bombing and indiscriminate death from the heavens. Good religion is the cure, and 'Religion does not cause wars' – the practice of bad interpretation leads to war.

2. WHAT IS BEING TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS AS 'RELIGIOUS EDUCATION'?

2 a) The short answer is that we teach what we allowed to teach according to the legislation, and by the parents, combined with the desire 'to keep the peace', and at the moment 'no one wants to offend the Muslims'. And we teach 'about' a religion, some supposed 'facts', not 'doing' the religion with a living, breathing heart. RE teachers do try their best to breathe life back into what they are allowed to do, with varying degrees of success.

A religion is more than some of its teachings, or even the sum of its teachings. Religion only comes alive when it is practiced. I often say when students visit my centre, that in the Library we have 5,000 books on Buddhism, but if you memorized every single book in the library, it would not make you a Buddhist, or even a good person. But, by practicing one single verse, with a sincere heart, you can change the world, and transform yourself.

We use the analogy of a bird needing two wings to fly. One of the wings is the strength of Wisdom (which is more than a mere collection of facts). The other wing is Meditation, with its resultant meditateness. It is only through constant meditation that Wisdom can be combined with Compassion (a result of meditating with the right content) which will then allow us to soar with ease over and through the experience of being a human being on this earth at this time.

The Wisdom wing has many 'feathers' to make it strong and complete, as does the Meditation wing. (Another night we might talk about what is the CONTENT of a fully enlightened being.

Do they know everything about everything? Or just everything about everything worth knowing? Would I trust the Buddha to fix my computer? Probably not. Would I trust him to lead me to a better world? Certainly!)

But, teaching meditation, and probably wisdom, is not allowed in schools, because that would be 'doing' a faith. Some schools disguise it by calling it 'contemplation' or 'quiet time' or some other name, but it is always just only briefly touched on. There is so much emphasis on the volume of the content and not on the quality of 'just being', because managers cannot measure it. By severing the second wing of meditation, Buddhism can appear to be quite a limp thing. Like dissecting a butterfly to see how it can fly. Or like trying to learn pole-vaulting by reading a book or watching the Olympics.

By reading and watching, it is possible to learn something but it is only by holding the pole, running down the approach and soaring into the air that we can truly experience the fear and the power, the absolute joy and freedom of soaring so high.

The prison of language: in the world of religions and faith there are many words used. Many of the words are the same but mean different things. Many of these words are different but mean the same things. Words such as pagan, idolatry, grace, mind, surrender, salvation, liberation, even 'god' and the qualities of 'god'. We are often trying to 'express the inexpressible'. The word 'enlightenment' is used in the West to mean a time of 'rational' thinking without the existence of God, just pure provable science. Faith and devotion and service have no place in that sort of 'enlightenment'.

In Buddhism, and all the Eastern religions, enlightenment means the highest sublime liberated state a human being can achieve. And with the greatest respect to scientists, few people would consider them in such a glorious and compassionate state, especially now when the majority of research funds is being diverted into weapons research. And do you know what the World Health Organisation gives as the second largest area of research in the world for the next decade? The answer is Tranquillisers! Better and better tranquillisers for the stressed-out West. True.

And a quick word about the words: 'east' and west'. West of what? The answer is 'from Rome'. The basis of our history was written by people in Rome, and in Latin. But thousands of cultures around the world do not give Rome a second thought (or even a first thought). Each of them considers themselves and their culture to be the centre of the world, and that everyone else is either east or west of their civilization.

At an annual lecture of the 'Friends of the Lambeth Palace Library' the speaker had researched and proven that there were 211 different editions of the Bible published in Shakespeare's lifetime. I found this figure as truly staggering! I thought that there may

have been one or two different versions, but 211! And, as a poet and a seeker, personally I love the King James version.

My point here is, just imagine how many different versions of the one 'True Word of God', (the person now known as Jesus did not speak Latin or Greek,) there are now, with 211 different translations in English, let alone the Spanish or Korean or Swahili versions! Imagine how many versions are now being lived by sincere people, or worse still, being argued and fought over?

At the tea party after the lecture I found myself talking with Archbishop Rowan Williams about the pitfalls of translation. He mentioned the translation of the Greek word 'metanoia', the verb 'to change'. One translation was 'acts of penance', the other translation was 'repentance'. One is an external activity, the other is an internal activity. This difference led to the 'Reformation' for some people, and to the 'Destruction of the Monasteries' for some other people.

2 b) GOOD LEARNING IS A FELT-EXPERIENCE:

I can still remember with great clarity and gratitude some of the best lessons I received in my school days.

In Maths, I can remember discovering the wonder of being able to describe every single place and motion in the universe as a mathematical formula. It might be a very long formula, but it is possible. Even to describe the orbit of this planet, Earth. It is an ellipse, a simple and elegant formula.

This came about in an intriguing way. In Physics I can remember the debate about the orbits of the planets. As I have said, every motion can be described as a mathematical formula. Scientists had the formula for all the planets' movements, but they were very long and complicated because the orbits went all over the sky, 'our' sky. The word 'planet' actually means 'wanderer'. Taking the earth as the centre of the universe, as we all do, Ptolemy worked it all out. These incredibly complicated formulae. Copernicus thought God is Simple. He would have designed something more elegant. So he put the Sun (and probably thinking 'God') as the centre of the universe and the rest, as they say, is history.

In English, I can remember the fantastic words that revealed the splendour of Coleridge and the glorious worlds his words revealed: 'In Xanadu the stately pleasure domes ...'

And the Rime of the Ancient Mariner, experiencing the starkness when we kill the albatross, that symbol of the wild, free spirit, and 'Alone, alone, alone on a wide, wide sea...'

More good lessons? Chemistry and the Periodic Table. Every single atom that exists in our universe can be placed on a simple repeating table with repeating characteristics. All matter is a combination of these basic building blocks. Something which was thought of by Socrates (or was it Pythagoras?)

And what great lessons can I remember from Religious Education? Do you know that I cannot remember a single lesson? And I actually won my School Prize for Religion. And I also won the Archbishop's Prize for the cleverest little Catholic in my confirmation year.

What does this say about the teaching of religion? Way back then in the dark ages? Well it must have had some beneficial effects, as I have been basically following a spiritual path for most of my life since that time, even including the lost 'sex, drugs and rock and roll' years. Those of us who can remember the Sixties, it was a period of great hope - and 'Make Love Not War' is still a good way to live today. Another slogan of the time, which is very apt today, was: 'What if they gave a war, and nobody came?'

Vietnam. Within six months of my winning the School Poetry Prize, I, along with the rest of seventeen year old Australian boys, was being conscripted to fight and kill complete strangers in Vietnam. All the Christian teachings I had received and believed deeply in said 'Thou Shalt Not Kill'. I had never seen, or seen to this day, any sub-text that said: 'but it is alright if they are Vietnamese.' Or 'it is alright to kill people if they are Oriental, or Communist or Muslim or 'Johnny Foreigner' in any way. So I was an objector to war. And I discovered later that my Japanese grandfather whose name 'Seto' I proudly bear, was also a war objector from the Japanese-Russian war of 1905, which is how he came to Australia and how I came to be born there, and with an Irish grandmother.

By the way, the carpet bombing of Cambodia did not bring peace and democracy, it bought the Khmer Rouge. The Agent Orange is still killing people today, as are the effects of the civilian atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Does anyone read any history any more?

2 c) THE PURPOSE OF RELIGION:

I cannot believe in any supreme being, or of course any human being, who says that killing other parts of the creation is the way to peace.

His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso the Dalai Lama of Tibet, who has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, is often quoted as saying that his 'Religion is Kindness'. Another master has said that the 84,000 teachings of Buddhism can be summarized as 'Non-Harmingness', which although not an elegant word, it is the flip side of Kindness. As one becomes gradually more aware of how we are all intertwining elements in an unfolding creation, it becomes more and more impossible to deliberately harm other beings.

The human journey, the purpose of being alive, is to help others, as we would like to be helped.

Or, if you can't do that just yet, as His Holiness says, 'at least do not harm'.

Along the way we can have small enlightenments, tiny liberations, minuscule salvations. These are best described, once experienced, in results where 'huge burdens fall off our shoulders'. Isn't that true? When we see the light, we feel lighter, and breathe easier.

3. WHAT BUDDHISM IS - (GOD, AND THE UNIVERSE, IS SIMPLE)

The whole complex world of computers is based on two numbers: 1 and 0. Power On or Off. (Zero is actually an Arabic invention by the way. In the West we could only think about what was there, not was not there.)

In religion, the whole complex world is based on two concepts: right and wrong. Or as Buddhists might say: 'virtuous' and 'non-virtuous', or 'wholesome' and 'unwholesome'.

The big issue for many people is 'Who Judges?' So many people seem to need a celestial Law Lord.

The entire 84,000 teachings of the Lord Buddha are summarized in one verse which has been translated as: 'Abandon Evil, Cultivate Good, Purify Your Heart-Mind.' In Buddhism the phrase 'Heart-Mind' is used to describe our individual consciousness, this thing we often call 'me'. The thing, that when it is separated from our body, means that 'we' are dead. Our essence is off travelling to its next destination.

'Evil' is defined as anything that slows down someone's progress towards their final liberation, salvation, enlightenment. 'Good' is defined as anything that quickens someone's progress to their final liberation. And 'Purify', well that is clear. We all know when something is pure or not, especially our own mind. The object is to develop, through the practice of 'abandoning and adopting' a heart-mind that is clear, unsullied, shining. In Buddhism the example of the lotus flower is used. That although its roots are deep in the slime and the muck, its flowers rise above it all, pure, beautiful and inspiring. In the West, roses could be a good example. Good muck, good scent. One of the praise phrases in Buddhism is 'that when seen brings joy'. Is this something that can be said of each of us? Are we yet at that state? If not, then the way is clear. Practice. 'Abandon' what needs to be abandoned. 'Cultivate' adopt what needs to be cultivated or adopted, like a gardener who wants to win the Chelsea Flower Show. The weeds need to go. By the roots.

4. WHAT IS BEING TAUGHT AS BUDDHISM IN SCHOOLS:

4 a) At a quick guess, as there are about 150 boroughs in the UK, and with roughly 100 schools per borough, that makes about 150,000 schools. (Is this correct?) The 2001 Census shows that there are 152,000 Buddhists in the UK. This is about one Buddhist per school, and not every person who calls themselves 'Buddhist' should be allowed into the schools. The '2004 Buddhist Directory, published by The Buddhist Society, lists about 1,000 centres of Buddhist activity around these isles. There is then a huge disparity between the number of schools teaching Buddhism, compared with those people who are qualified to visit and teach in the schools.

None of these 1,000 Buddhist centres are established to provide educational materials for the state. 95% of them are run by volunteers, at night, after their normal day jobs. And run for people who want to make Buddhism a part of their daily lives by 'doing' it, not just for those completing some school course work. The centres get so many letters asking for teaching materials, and at the exact key stage as well! The material is just not there, in most cases.

Some background to 'Academic Buddhism':

In the late eighteenth century Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (1830 – 1907) was the 'first American of European descent to convert to Buddhism' but it was his type of 'Protestant Buddhism'. Much of what he published is very unique. Madame Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society also published much material which was a personal combination of what they thought Buddhism should be. One book was even titled: 'Buddha: the Perfect Victorian Gentleman'. Much of these views are still around in various forms, and should be avoided.

In my opinion, what bits of Buddhism should be taught in schools?

My advice would be to 'Keep It Simple' (as we do not have 10,000 people qualified to teach Buddhism in schools). And try to make it as powerful as possible. First of all, briefly cover the life story of the Buddha, then his principal teachings which are the Four Noble Truths, Karma and Impermanence. Everything else flows from there, and most of these teachings can be beneficially and usefully used by people of every religion and by those people with no religious convictions. We do not have a conversion ethic. The point of Buddhism is to benefit the world.

The Dalai Lama also says that the purpose of all religions is to grow good people. And how do we do that? By understanding the Four Noble Truths as two sets of effect and cause. The first set is the path of people stuck in the world. (In Life there is Suffering. It is caused by grasping and cravings). The second set is the path of people who want to transform the world by cultivating like any good gardener, all the right causes and conditions for healthy growth. (All sufferings can cease. The way to peace is the Eightfold Path). And all it starts with basic morality: do not kill, do not lie, do not steal.

And how are we to know what is 'wholesome' or 'unwholesome' and why should we abandon one and cultivate the other? Simply by looking at their effects. In Buddhism this is called the law of karma, or cause and effect. The Bible says: 'By their fruits so shall they be known' – this is a statement of karma. This is also a statement of justice. How we behave determines how we will be treated. This is an extremely fair way of organizing the universe. Basically karma is a highly developed form of the teaching: 'As you sow, so shall you reap.' And, for Buddhists, karma is a natural law, like gravity. It does not require a celestial judge to make it work.

5. BUDDHISM IS MORE THAN GOOD PSYCHOLOGY:

In the West, anger is often considered a good thing, a release, a therapy. Anger at Injustice. Is this the right way forward? (Link to Citizenship?)

Being 'Intolerant about Intolerance'. Is this a Good Thing?

Buddhism says that every thought, word and deed we undertake (and the word 'karma' means 'action') conditions our 'mind-heart' (this word is uncomfortable but please stick with it) both in the present and in the future. You can NOT learn how to be peaceful by being angry. Or 'fighting for peace'. It is like fornicating for virginity.

If you want to lose weight, you have to eat less and exercise more. If you want to grow more peaceful, you need to stop doing things that cause trouble. Simple.

I will now give several good quotes, because I am sure you will not believe just me.

One master says: 'For countless lifetimes, we have vented our anger. Were this a way of releasing it permanently, we would be enlightened by now. But the opposite is true. Our anger has only become more strongly embedded in our mind, manifesting as negative experiences that further trigger this poisonous emotion.' 'Change of Heart', pg 54)

'If we are revolted by a face in the mirror, we can vent our anger at it by smashing the glass. But if we look in another mirror, we will see the same face. Similarly, we need to resolve our anger, or we will see it reflected everywhere we go.' (COH, pg 55)

DISPLAYING A WRATHFUL ASPECT:

(not a wrathful god with vengeance, without forgiveness or compassion, but like a parent training a willful child)

‘The purpose of wrath is not to punish or harm, but to be of greatest benefit. Wrath does not have the slightest taint of anger or self-centredness. It is merely a display. If you become angry, you are only fooling yourself about your compassion.’ (COH, pg 64)

‘Anger is never useful. It is a product of our deluded mind, like a rope that we mistake for a snake. Most of us believe that we have a right to be angry. But there is no such thing as the right to be angry. Our habitual reaction to conflict is to blame someone. The habit of lashing out lies deep within us all.’ (COH, pg 56-57)

‘If a fire is raging on the kitchen floor, we obviously can’t put it out by piling on firewood. Once we realise that anger creates negative karma, which causes suffering, we will no longer want to add wood to the fire.’ (COH, pg 58)

‘Anger is like a transparency on an overhead projector. Overlaid on the mind, and magnified, it will eventually project the reality of hell.’ (COH, pg 60)

‘As humans, we have the ability to work with our impulses. If we know that when we throw a ball forcefully against a wall, it will rebound and hit us, we won’t throw it so hard. Similarly, if we know that the seeds of hatred and cruelty produce hell, we won’t let these seeds grow in the fertile ground of the mind.’ (COH, pg 60)

‘What we need is prevention: to look carefully at how and when our anger arises and learn to develop a longer fuse. Prevention requires being very methodical at first. You have to be persistent. If you practice this for only an hour or two, you can’t expect to never get angry again.’ (COH, pg 62)

Letting Go: People are afraid that if they let go of their anger and righteousness and wrath, and look at their own feelings – even to see the good in a bad person – they are going to lose the energy they need to do something about the problem. But actually you get more strength and energy by operating from a place of love and concern. You can be just as tough, but more effectively tough. It is like a martial art. (Thurman)

6. BUDDHISM IS MORE THAN JUST MARTIAL ARTS:

There are many strange beliefs about Buddhism and the martial arts, many of which come from the movies, this absolute fantasy which has destroyed the notion that ‘It must be true, I saw it with my own eyes!’

The Buddha is often shown in statues wearing the robes of a monk, with his right arm bare.

Traditionally, this was to show that the monk was not wearing armour, or carrying a weapon. That he was harmless, or ‘armless’. However, in various times of civil unrest, bandits began to attack monks for the very little they had, so the monks began to develop ways of protecting themselves, without violence, to the attackers. So the various martial arts were born. But again, it is all about controlling the aggressor, making the aggressor ineffective, not killing him, and NOT getting angry.

To my knowledge, there has not been the development of 'Christian martial art'. One supposedly 'Christian' response was the four Crusades, the effects of which we are still experiencing a thousand years later, and according to the BBC series, actually killed more Christians and Jews than Muslims. But humans often never let the facts get in the road of a good story.

POWER VERSUS VIOLENCE:

Robert Thurman says that his wife once met Morihei Ueshiba, the man who founded Aikido.

After a demonstration where he left about seventeen big bruises on the ground, she asked what his secret was for disarming his attackers without harming them. He giggled and told her: "A long time ago, I realised that every person was just my sister, my brother, my cousin. All those guys lying on the floor are my brothers, you are my little sister! Everybody is just one family." That is cool heroism. (Thurman)

Another Ueshiba quote: 'To conquer oneself is to defeat every enemy.'

'To conquer hate, you have to find unshakeable tolerance. The seventh-century Buddhist saint Shantideva was the great master of that. The sixth chapter of his 'Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life' (Bodhicharyavatara) is considered to be a special magical precept from Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, for replacing anger with tolerance. The essence is: Why get upset if you can do something about something? And if you can't do something about it, then why get upset? Anger, the text says, comes from feeling uncomfortable because something you don't want to happen is happening, or something you want to happen is not happening. Then you lose your good cheer – your joyousness in just being – and start operating from a place of misery and anger.' (Thurman)

RECOGNISING THE DARK SIDE:

We all have the potential to be killers; realising that potential is the key. Years ago some academics (and Robert Thurman) did a study of religious violence. We found that the people who are most violent are those who are incapable of embracing their own potential for evil. By projecting their shadow, their evil, onto the other, they justify their violence. They think they are emphasising their own purity, or restoring their purity, by destroying someone else. (Thurman)

Surgical Violence – killing the one to save the many – is part of the bodhisattva ethic. The problem with American-style warfare since World War II is that we've relied on carpet bombing – civilian bombing. Civilian bombing is a kind of terrorism in itself, and there's nothing surgical about it. It's just blanket annihilative violence. And that produces this terrible blowback of terrorism and people filled with revenge and hatred. It incites more violence, whereas surgical violence had better be surgical – aiming to heal. (Thurman)

First do your own confession:

In Christian terms, people are asked to consider that those without sin can cast the first stone. In Buddhism many people practice daily confessing 'all my negative actions, since beginningless time.' This happens before starting to think about what others might have done wrong. First, as they say, pull the log out of your own eyes before pointing at the faults of others.

7. WHERE IS THE DIVINE IN BUDDHISM?

The 'God' in Buddhism could be seen to be the law of karma. As I've said, what a better way to run the universe? If one constantly does wholesome things, then wholesome results will follow as naturally as the cart follows the horse, for this lifetime and for all the other lifetimes. Everyone will always 'get their due', eventually, in due course.

'We need to realize that we can get greater energy out of love and joy than out of hatred. Hatred is so off balance. You can blow your adrenal glands in one minute, then you're shaky and weak. But if you're joyful, you'll get an endless source of energy.'
(Thurman)

8. CONCLUSIONS:

So, in conclusion, I hope I haven't completely put you off teaching Buddhism in schools. Buddhism is simple, but not always easy to do, especially if you start in the wrong place.

Last night I was among a group of people invited by the Prime Minister and Mrs Blair to No. 10 Downing Street to hear a talk by the Archbishop of Canterbury which he titled: 'Belief and Unbelief in Religious Education'. His 'ideal religious education course' would combine autobiographies of the 'holy ones' with those of creative artists. To investigate why people did what they did, and how they did it. To contrast the 'doing of things' with the 'doing nothing faithfully' of contemplatives.

At the question and answer session at the end, one person asked how can we talk about multi-faith activity and tolerating other religions where God says that our 'Holy Book' is the only truth?

My question to the Archbishop was: 'Do you think God had only one religion, and do you think God would host an interfaith evening like this one?'

Some more of the 'Wit and Wisdom of Rowan' from his speech were:

'Religion is a place where you put things that will not go in any other place.'

'In the spiritual quest and in normal life, even the smallest turning towards the light transforms the whole world.'

'We shall die, and we may fail, but our value does not depend on that, but on the seeds we have scattered.'

I pray that some of this talk has spread some good seeds, and may they blossom into a more peaceful world some time in the future, soon. Thank you.

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'Cool Heroism', by Robert Thurman, PhD, named as one of 'Time' Magazine's "25 Most Influential People of 1997", available on the internet.

For books on Buddhism:

Wisdom Books have the largest collection for distribution in Europe.

25 Stanley Road, Ilford, Essex. Tele: 020.8553.5020. There is a good website.

About the author:

At the time of giving this speech Paul Seto was the Director of The Buddhist Society, in London, established in 1924. Previously he was National Co-ordinator of the Network of Buddhist Organizations (UK). He has been practicing, studying and teaching Buddhism for some thirty years. He is now living in retreat in a caravan on a Queensland beach, where he hopes to follow his own advice and to 'Keep It Simple.'