

Discrimination: A Buddhist perspective

Mizzima - Friday, 17 August 2012 17:22 Dr. Paul Fuller

(Commentary) – There have been many views expressed over the unrest in Rakhine State and the plight and history of the Rohingyas.



Dr. Paul Fuller

Buddhism has something distinctive to say here. What views are right on matters of race and religion, culture and ethnicity, according to the Buddhist texts?

We might expect that the Buddha, as expressed in the Pali Canon, would offer a system whereby all views and opinions are abandoned – one should not adhere to any position as this will ultimately lead to attachment. Indeed when the Buddha himself is asked by Dandapani in the Madhupindika-sutta what view and doctrine he proclaims, the Buddha replies that he asserts such a doctrine whereby one does not argue with anyone in the world, such a doctrine that leads to the abandonment of suffering.

The Buddha's teachings lead to the overcoming of all attachments, to all mental standpoints. Indeed, as the famous simile of the raft teaches, even the Buddha's teachings, the dhamma, should not become an object of attachment, it should be let go once it has served its purpose of overcoming suffering.

However, away from the refinements of ascetic solitude how, are we to understand the teachings where nation, race and religion (ah-myo batha thar-ta-nar) become so connected?

In Buddhist history we know that defending the Buddhist religion can lead for the justification of violence against those who are perceived to be attacking it. In Sri Lankan history there is the famous Dutthagamani who was consoled by an Arahant (Yahanda) with the notion that though he was suffering remorse because he had caused the death of millions there were in fact limited negative consequences to his actions as few whom he had killed were keeping the Five Precepts or had taken refuge in the Three Jewels.

“Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts.”

Few whom he had killed were Buddhist. He was defending the dhamma, protecting the Buddha's teachings from destruction, therefore killing was in a sense justified. A Buddhist nation was being protected. While I am not suggesting that such rhetoric is being used in Burma some of the debate is certainly heading towards such conclusions being made.

As a specialist of Pali Buddhism, I would like to be allowed to offer my own views on holding to certain points of view. At the outset we might state that a Buddhist should not judge a person by colour

or race, nationality or religion, but, by their conduct. There is a tendency in early Buddhism to criticize the Indian Caste system. In these discourses, the Vasala-sutta in the Sutta-nipata is an example, it is stated that a person is not noble because of the status afforded them through their birth but because of their conduct. Action is primary.

By one's actions and conduct one becomes noble, not through race or colour. To perceive things in this way is a right view. It is the view that acknowledges that actions have consequences, that understands that karma exists. For this reason, among others, views and opinions are not a trivial thing in Pali Buddhism.

Indeed, one holding wrong views can expect a very negative birth, in the hell realms. For it is not only bodily actions that have a negative consequence, but actions also of speech and mind. It is in the latter that the notion of wrong-views are found, and wrong views are a type of discrimination in which one adheres and is attached to a particular opinion. They are forms of craving which clearly lead to suffering.

What then are wrong views? The term ditthi can be translated as "views." The first distinction made in the early Buddhist texts are between views that are "wrong"(miccha) and "right" (samma.) Any view that does not agree with Buddhist doctrine is a wrong view; any view that agrees with Buddhist doctrine. These are the two broadest categories within which we may understand the notion of ditthi. What then specifically are wrong views?

Wrong views are those that deny that actions have consequences, they deny the law of karma (in so doing they lead to what is unwholesome). In a more philosophical way Wrong views are views that take what is impermanent to be permanent and lead to suffering. What is right-View? These can be summarized in the following four ways. Right view is knowing that our actions have consequences. It is acceptance of the law of karma; right view is knowing what is wholesome and unwholesome (kusala/akusala); right view is knowledge of the four noble truths (ariyasacca); right view is knowledge of dependent-origination, knowing that happiness and sadness are conditioned, unstable and impermanent. When the Buddha considered 'views' and 'beliefs' he taught that they are primarily a form of attachment.

A Buddhist should not adhere to any view, even a Buddhist view, the dhamma itself. As soon as a follower of the Buddha becomes attached to the Buddhist teaching then the truth and value of the dhamma is diminished. As is argued in the Brahmajala-sutta Buddhist teachings can only be considered superior to other religious teachings precisely because they lead to the transcendence of all attachment, the letting go of all positions, the abandonment of all conflict and the ending of all discrimination. For the Buddha having understood as they really are the origin and passing away of feelings (all things, views, discrimination and beliefs) their satisfaction, unsatisfactoriness, and the escape from them, the Buddha is emancipated through nonattachment.

With right view one knows that all actions, including mental action, for example discrimination, leads to what is unwholesome, it will have a negative consequence. Therefore, in very real terms holding to a discriminating viewpoint leads to a negative rebirth. This is very explicit in the Buddha's teachings found in the Pali Canon.

It is often stated that discriminating and holding views is a wilderness, a turmoil, a clinging, a bad path and a false way.

Whereas a Buddhist arrives at clarity in body, speech and mind in the following way: “Abandoning the killing of living beings, abstaining therefrom; abandoning the taking of what is not given, abstaining therefrom; abandoning misconduct in sensual pleasure...abandoning false speech...malicious speech...harsh speech...gossip, abstaining therefrom. Abandoning greed, he is no more greedy. Abandoning malevolence and hatred, his heart becomes free from ill will. Abandoning wrong-view, he becomes one of right view.”

This, to my way of thinking, is precisely the opposite to the reactions by some on social media websites and elsewhere in relation to the problems in Rakhine State, where false, harsh and malicious speech are prevalent. Most important for Buddhist metaphysics is the prevalence of wrong views in relation to the Rohingya and the discrimination displayed. For wrong views, as the embodiment of mental attachment, is as bad as, if not worse, than attachments to objects of the senses is the cause of a negative rebirth. The reaction of a disciple of the Buddha is one in which they are freed from covetousness (*vigatābhijjha*), malevolence (*vigatavyapada*) and not bewildered (*asammulha*) but attentive (*sampajana*) and concentrated (*patissato*), with a mind full of loving-kindness (*metta-sahagatena cetasa*).

That person then abides, suffusing the whole world with a mind possessed of loving-kindness. How different is this to one who holds wrong view, who discriminates. In some senses such a person is like an animal, like a dog. In the the *Kukkuravatika-sutta* we meet *Seniya*, a naked dog duty ascetic – (*kukkura-vatiko*), who practices like a dog, and has the destiny of a dog according to his wrong-view. By acting in such a way the Buddha asserts that one develops the deluded mind of an animal and “on the dissolution of the body, after death, he reappears in the company of dogs, or by developing the mind of a dog (*kukkuracittam*) and dog behavior (*kukkurasilam*) it will lead to hell or the animal womb.” This is the outcome of being attached to a wrong view, of behaving with greed, hatred and delusion, behaving with the view of an animal.

The Pali Canon has a very strong and unequivocal teaching that mental attachment is extremely detrimental – a biased view which asserts that people achieve freedom from suffering in any way other than their conduct is a distorted and perverted view. It is a mental attitude that leads to a very detrimental rebirth, and to pain and unhappiness in this life. It can be stated then with some certainty that in the Pali Canon there is a very strong teaching that any form of discourse that proposes a racist opinion is a wrong view, it will lead to suffering and, indeed, is *dukkha* itself.

Those holding such opinions will not only suffer in the future but are themselves an expression of mental turmoil while holding such views. They are immersed in *dukkha* not *metta*.

Dr. Paul Fuller is the author of The Notion of Ditthi in Theravada Buddhism: The point of view; Routledge, 2005