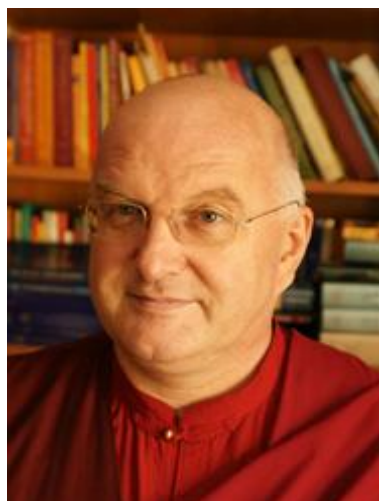


Lama Rinczen

What good can come from a meeting of non-theistic Buddhism with theistic religions?

*This article was published in: "Wielość religii - jedność prawdy". Edited by: Marek Kita.
Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II, 2011.
Biblioteka Ekumenii i Dialogu vol. 35, ISBN 978-83-7438-293-9*

About the author:



Lama Waldemar Zych (Lama Rinczen) has been practising Tibetan Buddhism for over thirty years. He has frequently travelled to Asia and Western Europe to study Buddha's teachings.

His primary teacher is Venerable Tenga Rinpoche, the abbot of Benchen Monastery. Upon completing relevant studies and preparations, Lama Rinczen spent four and a half years in a traditional meditation retreat earning the title of a lama, a Buddhist clergyman. He has been teaching Buddhism in Western Europe and Poland for many years.

Lama Waldemar Zych is the Chairman of the Polish Buddhist Union under the patronage of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the Chairman of the Council of the Benchen Karma Kamtsang Buddhist Association in Poland.

Seeing the representatives of world's greatest religions participating in this meeting it would be difficult not to notice that Buddhism is in many aspects different from the traditions represented here. The other three religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have certain features in common. All were born in the region of Middle Eastern culture, they share the belief in the Creator God, and have been present in Poland since centuries as an integral part of our cultural heritage. Buddhism however, originated in the distant Indian subcontinent, spread to the Far East, while in India itself it practically ceased to exist in the 12th century. In Poland, Buddhism is a completely new phenomenon. The first organized Buddhist groups appeared in our country only in the mid 1970's. Their development has gradually led to the establishment of several formally registered religious organizations. Today, when most children of the pioneers of Polish Buddhism consciously and freely adopt their parents' religion, we are dealing with barely the second generation of Polish followers of this religion. Immigrants from traditionally Buddhist countries also have been living in our country since recently.

Due to these historical and geographical conditions, Buddhist teachings are not only little known in Poland, but often misunderstood and wrongly presented. Therefore, here, I will attempt to answer the questions and clear the misunderstandings which I encounter the most often.

Is non-theistic Buddhism a religion?

In the title of my speech I used the term "non-theistic Buddhism", deliberately avoiding the word "atheist."

Differences in these terms should not be reduced to merely a linguistic or philosophical level. We should also keep in minds the historical and political context. When I read in the well-known book "Crossing the Threshold of Hope" that Buddhism was an atheistic religion, I asked a Tibetan friend what he thought about it. He sadly replied: "Well, you know that almost all of the six thousand monasteries in Tibet were destroyed in the name of atheism and fighting religion. Monks and nuns were beaten, humiliated and forced to publicly break their celibacy. A million and a half Tibetans, from the six million nation, were killed. When now anyone says that I, a Buddhist monk, am an atheist, it is simply heartbreaking."

In Poland atheism for years was also connected with opposition to theism. This is one of the many reasons, why I prefer to call Buddhism a non-theistic system.

In this context people often ask whether Buddhism is at all a religion? The answer depends on the definition used. If for someone religion is equivalent to faith in Creator God, then, it has to be said, this kind of faith is absent in Buddhism. However, there are many other views, which Buddhism shares with other religions. Primarily, it is the belief that human existence does not come to an end with the death of a physical body. After death our spirit, soul or

consciousness – whatever we call this non-physical aspect of our existence - continues. We also have in common the conviction that our fate after death depends on the actions taken during our lives. Buddhism includes the concept of prayer and faith that it may affect our and other's situations, help the living and the dead. Therefore, in this sense Buddhism is a religion.

Who is Buddha?

I often hear the question: "to whom do Buddhists actually pray?" To Buddha, of course! However, it should be explained what is meant under this term.

Basically, there are two main paths, two basic trends in Buddhism. The first being Theravada, which has mainly developed in southern Asian countries, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia. The other is Mahayana Buddhism, which spread from the Himalayan region to Mongolia, Vietnam, China, Korea and Japan. The number of followers, obviously, is not a criterion of truth of any doctrine, yet it has to be said, that most Buddhists practice Mahayana. In Theravada Buddhism not many descriptions can be found of what happened to Buddha after he left his body. To the human mind it is simply incomprehensible, but nowhere in any sacred text of this tradition is it stated that the Buddha passed away and now he is not there. Westerners often depict Buddha as a sage from the Sakya family – a highly ethic person, who had something wise to say, and then, as any mortal, he died and is gone. Theravada Buddhism does not claim that Buddha ceased to exist, yet this what happens to him after he had left his physical body remains inexpressible. Therefore, reaching Buddhahood does not mean self-annihilation, as it is often, wrongly, presented in the West.

In Mahayana Buddhism buddahood is defined as the unity of three aspects, known in Sanskrit as the three Kayas. Kaya literally means "body", although not in physical sense.

The first body is the Dharmakaya: the Dharma Body or the Kaya of the Ultimate Truth. Dharmakaya can by no means be expressed in words. A classic Mahayana text describes in seventy-two ways what Dharmakaya is not, but it does not explain what it is. Dharmakaya does not have form. It is not composed, therefore it cannot fall apart. It was not created in a certain time, therefore it cannot cease to exist. It is not in any location. It cannot be studied by any of the senses. Not only it cannot be seen, heard, smelled etc., but also it cannot be comprised by thought as it exceeds reason. It is called the Absolute or the Ultimate Truth. When I heard a protestant theologian saying that God is the unconditioned, I almost screamed out: "excuse me, you gave the definition of Buddha!"

Mahayana treatises say that Dharmakaya is the state of Buddha in itself, its essence. Unlimited love and compassion for all sentient beings without exception are mentioned among the myriad qualities of Dharmakaya. Since this Kaya cannot be perceived or directly communicated with, it emanates, as a manifestation of love and compassion, Kayas having form.

Due to the existence of two groups of those who need help, there are two kinds of Form-Kayas. The first is Sambhogakaya, the Kaya of Great Happiness: Buddha forms manifesting in Pure Lands or – shall we call them that – Buddhist paradise. Various forms of Sambhogakaya manifest to become guides for those who have managed to achieve a very high level of spiritual development: they have purified gross obscurations of mind and are completely free of emotional defilement. How one can learn from Sambhogakaya? A certain level of spiritual purity – called the first level of a Bodhisattva – has to be achieved. When dying one will not give in to any negative feelings such as anger. Owing to a pure state of mind and good deeds from this life we can be reborn in one of the Pure Lands, where we will receive teachings from Sambhogakaya and quickly progress through the following stages of the Bodhisattva path leading to the state of Buddha. Those, who attain this spiritual purity already during their life, may receive this guidance in visions. There are many forms of Sambhogakaya in Buddhist iconography. They have a heavenly appearance; often numerous arms and faces. The history of Mahayana Buddhism is full of saints who have received such visions while awake, during meditation or sleep. Statistics might be out of place here, but it seems that there were even more visionaries in the Buddhist tradition than in Christianity. Of course, a lot of revelations were found inauthentic – and only a few found their way into the canon. Hence the old joke, which can probably be applied to any religion: "When you speak to the Buddha, it is called prayer, but when the Buddha speaks to you, it's madness."

Finally, the third aspect of Buddha, the Nirmanakaya, the Kaya of Emanations: the physical presence of the Buddha in this world to teach ordinary people whose minds are burdened not only by fundamental ignorance, but also emotional obscurations and other weaknesses. Nirmanakaya forms of activity can be very numerous. The most sublime, but not the only one, was the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha himself, when asked by the disciples before his death: "to whom should we turn to when you leave?", replied: "I will appear in the form of countless teachers." In order to help people understand the truth and to lead them beyond suffering, words such as Buddha and Buddhism do not have to be used. The activity of the Buddha can manifest itself also in the form of the activities of doctors, scientists and artists. Also, teachers of other religions are often seen in Buddhism as manifestation of Buddha, which appear as such in a certain place and time to teach in the most suitable way, leading people to the Truth. For this reason, respect for other religions is inscribed in Buddhism.

As I mentioned, many people in the West depict the Buddha as simply a very wise man. As a consequence questions like: "to whom Buddhists pray?" appear. For a Mahayana Buddhist, Buddha, like Christ for Christians, is much more than a wise man. Buddha is Dharmakaya - the Absolute. And at the same time a stream of countless forms of Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya, manifesting continually in order to help all sentient beings. So Buddhists pray to the Buddha. And because the Dharmakaya pervades everything, you can pray anytime, anywhere.

Buddhist concept of emptiness

Another issue that raises a lot of confusion, is the Buddhist concept of emptiness. When we define the perceived objects as empty, it only means that none of them is independent of everything else, none of them is an self-existing entity. Interdependent phenomena arise through conditioning. A specific set of elementary particles is called an atom. There is no atom independent of the particles. In essence it is an empty concept, the name given to a collection of other elements. A great set of atoms is called, for example, a pen. But there is no self-existing pen, independent of the particles that compose it. It is an empty concept, which does not mean that this object is not manifested. Emptiness is a characteristic of what we describe, not some independent entity. What's more, we say that Dharmakaya is empty, because no known qualities can be attributed to it nor can it be described by any concepts. Empty, that is, without characteristic, which we ascribe to ordinary objects of our perception. However, this does not mean that there is no Dharmakaya. Dharmakaya is in essence empty, but its nature is love and compassion. Emptiness and compassion of Dharmakaya form an inseparable unity.

Once a priest asked me: "I heard a lot of Buddhist emptiness, but please tell me whether it is personal?" "Excuse me, but I grew up in an atmosphere of atheism, and then became a Buddhist" I answered honestly. "I do not understand the concept of personal. By saying that God is personal, do Christians suggest that God thinks about himself: I feel like this and that? I'll help this guy, because he likes me, and that other one no, because he doesn't?" The priest answered very shortly: "No! God is love!" Then I assured that I can bring a stack of Buddhist canonical texts, which are full of statements: "emptiness is love and compassion."

I must admit, that when I hear about God as the supreme Truth, who is love, and compare it with the concept of three Kayas, I see many similarities, yet there are some important differences. Perhaps the most significant of these is that the Buddha is not a creator. According to the Buddha it is us all who co-create this world. However, even though he is not a creator, he can help beings in this world. A detailed explanation of this issue would require a much broader discussion that goes beyond this short speech. I do want to emphasize however that the Buddha did not leave the creatures of this world alone. The two Kayas having form still work for their benefit, yet the Buddha cannot save us against our will. The last words uttered by Buddha Shakyamuni were: "I have shown you the path to liberation; it is up to you whether you will take it."

Can a Christian practice Buddhism?

I am asked this question quite often. First of all, because some Christians today try to apply Buddhist meditation techniques. The answer, once again, depends on the clear definition of the term "practice Buddhism." One becomes a Buddhist by taking the triple refuge: in the Buddha, his Dharma and the Sangha. This is done during a ceremony, when we declare: "I take, and from now on I will

always take refuge, in the Buddha, as the supreme, infallible Teacher." Secondly, we take refuge in the Dharma, the Buddha's Teaching, and therefore we recognize that it is flawless and the truest path. Thirdly, we take refuge in the Sangha, the community of those who transmit these teachings.

With taking Refuge come specific vows. One of them is a commitment not to take refuge in beings that are not Buddhas. Ancient Buddhist writings mention here, for example, the spirits of nature, but also, by name, Hindu gods. This does not mean that these deities are treated with hostility. On the contrary, they can be powerful allies, but still they themselves need Refuge in the Buddha.

Westerners who are interested in joining the Buddhist path, often ask if they have to deny Christ. The answer which I have invariably heard from high-ranking Tibetan lamas, was that "there is no reason for doing so." The essence of Buddha's teachings is love and compassion, and the main message of Christ - mercy. After learning about Christ's life, all those lamas claim that without doubt he fulfils the definition of a Bodhisattva, that is, someone who totally gives priority to the welfare of others above his or her own. And here is the fundamental difference in approach. Buddhists see one of the great Bodhisattvas in Christ, for Christians he is the only Saviour. Therefore, a Buddhist has no problem with going to church and showing reverence to Christ, remaining true to the belief that the Buddha is the ultimate refuge.

I do not think that believing in Christ as the only Saviour, one could take refuge in the Buddha, even if one respects Buddha's extensive teachings on ethics and compassion. An entirely different issue is the use of meditation techniques, practical spiritual exercises, which have been developed in the Buddhist tradition. Buddha does not have copyrights for meditation and mind training. He acted solely in order to help people and other beings endowed with minds. If these techniques are used for better understanding of someone's religion and being a good man, a Buddhist can only rejoice. I do not think, however, that the use of borrowed mind and body training techniques is practising Buddhism as such. Being a Buddhist, after all, is based on taking the triple refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.

What good can come from a meeting of non-theistic Buddhism with theistic religions?

We must be aware of the great social changes that were brought about by the remarkable development of technology in the last century. We live in times when the world is increasingly becoming a global village. We see this also here, in Poland. In my youth the sight of a man from another continent was a real sensation. We were also told that we are a country of one nation and one worldview. Today, not only more and more Poles travel around the world and learn different customs, but also the presence of other nationalities and cultures is increasingly evident in Poland. In addition to the formerly resident ethnic and religious minorities, we share the country with tens of thousands of Asians from

the Far East who grew up in Buddhist cultures. Statistics show that a growing number of immigrants from Arab countries and native Muslims comes to Poland. We know from various studies that a permanent increase of foreign-born population is not only a permanent and irreversible process, but also necessary for the development of our country. The experience of many places in the world has shown that in the long run, different cultures and communities should not live next to each other in closed ghettos, because this leads to tension and hostility stemming from ignorance and prejudice against the "other" and the misunderstanding of the reactions and attitudes that come with specific cultural and religious backgrounds. In our times learning about foreign religions and cultures, not only ceased to be a fad, but it is absolutely essential in order for us to live together in harmony. Thus, inter-religious dialogue is a social value.

Meeting with people with different views can also be a factor inspiring to deepen our own spirituality, which does not necessarily mean borrowing elements of a different faith and creating some cross-religious conglomerate. As a Buddhist, I am deeply convinced that Buddhism is a complete and infallible spiritual path. Thus, although the dialogue with Christians inspires me to think about different aspects of my life and provides an incentive to deepen my spiritual practice, I do not feel the need to learn from Christians the techniques of kneeling in prayer, saying the rosary, or lying face down. I also do not expect Christians to receive Holy Communion sitting in the lotus position! I believe that Christianity is able to fully meet the spiritual needs of its followers and that it does not lack anything. Every mother loves her child the most and considers it to be beautiful. Similarly, I am firmly convinced that Buddhism is the best religion... for me. And certainly Christianity is the best religion for a Christian, Islam for a Muslim, and Judaism for its followers.

Personally, I have better understood some Buddhist teachings, when it was explained to me how Christians approach similar issues. I've also heard from Christians, that this or that Buddhist truth has inspired them to have a fresher look on their religion.

Wisely guided inter-religious dialogue may therefore be an important factor leading to deepening own spirituality, as well as inspiring the witnesses of such meetings. Amid the increased consumerism and commercialization of many fields, inter-religious dialogue should be encouraged to seek spiritual values, underlining not only the ultimate goals of religion, but also bringing greater social sensitivity and harmony into the present life.

The main purpose of the meeting of non-theistic Buddhism with theistic religions is fostering mutual understanding. It is very important, because thanks to it we will overcome the lack of knowledge. Fears and prejudices will disappear. The most important message of all great religions is love for other people. We know how much suffering was caused in this world by failing to see humanity in those who dared to believe and think differently. How could we expect understanding and tolerance from ordinary worshipers, when priests had not been able to show the path with their own example? I consider the very fact that

a meeting such as this conference, during which priests and representatives of different religions sit at a table in the atmosphere of respect and carry out a dialogue, to be highly beneficial.

Translated into English by Sandra Wierzbicka