

Quick Dharma Series

Useful Religion

By Gyoshin

I believe that useful religions are those whose teachings can be brought to life in every living being. A religion limited to philosophers, ministers, scholars, monks, and nuns is not a useful religion. Only that religion that is able to touch and be understood by the least able, least educated, and those among us in the lowest stations of life, is what I call a "Useful Religion."

In the twenty-fifth chapter of the book of Mathew Jesus said, "For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me into your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me." Then the righteous will reply, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and fed you, or thirsty and gave you drink, a stranger and took you home, or naked and clothed you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and come to visit you" And the king will answer, "I tell you this: anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me."

Five hundred years earlier, in the *Mahavagga Sutra* 8, 26:3, the Buddha said, "Anyone, O monks, who wants to stand by me should stand by the afflicted."

The highest aspiration of the religious impulse has always been to focus on the "least among us." If it cannot, then it is a religion for the few, understanding for the few, salvation for the elect, and a dead religion. A useful religion is one that is able to touch the living center of each being and be universal in its practice. Everyone must be lifted up for one person to be lifted up.

From a Buddhist perspective a central law of spiritual life is that there is no spiritual progress, no enlightenment, unless all can participate (even the "least among us"). **Similarly, the so called "Golden Rule" is not simply an exhortation to a more moral life: on a deep level it is a statement of how things work.** There is little progress on my path without your progress. And in turn, your spiritual progress is tied to that of others. This necessity is natural and, through the application of Mindfulness, can be confirmed

in the expanded awareness of our own development. This expanding awareness has, from infancy, been a shift from concern only for ourselves, to concern for family, society, country, planet, and universe. This is our bright and shining destiny: to bloom like the opening petals of a lotus.

In Karida practice the Bodhisattva Kuan Shih Yin is seen as the external symbol of our own inner development of compassion. This ideal of compassion embraces all beings in their diversity. To see her as a goddess, an object of worship, or as a magical purveyor of favors, is idolatry in its purest sense, and to be avoided if we seriously wish to embrace the "useful religion" of taking responsibility for our own inner development. Sutra chanting, calm abiding meditation and other spiritual practices are devices that bring to bear the nature of the Bodhisattva on our inner work. As we take responsibility for this inner work we will lift the consciousness of all beings.

I call this "Useful Religion."