

DISAGREE

TO

DISAGREE

conversations on conversion

好好说“不” - 宗教和谐对话

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The founders of each religion had as their basic aim the unity of mankind – to foster harmony, goodwill and understanding among all people of the world.

Like bees gathering honey from different flowers, the wise one sees only the good in all religions and accepts the essence of the different teachings. For example:

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## 01 | COMMON AIM ~ Extracted from *Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda (Buddhist Attitude Towards Other Religions, Page 7)*

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**Buddhism says,** “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

**Taoism says,** “Regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss.”

**Christianity says,** “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.”

**Islam says,** “Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you, and reject for others what you would reject for yourself.”

**Hinduism says,** “Let no one do to others what he would not have done to himself.”



Singapore values our multi-racial and multi-religious harmony. At the 2009 National Day Rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong raised a concern regarding the maintenance of religious harmony in Singapore.

He pointed out that the aggressive pushing of one's religion onto others can prove detrimental to our society. Prime Minister Lee highlighted the importance of maintaining racial and religious harmony through tolerance and restraint, as well as preserving the common space that all Singaporeans share.

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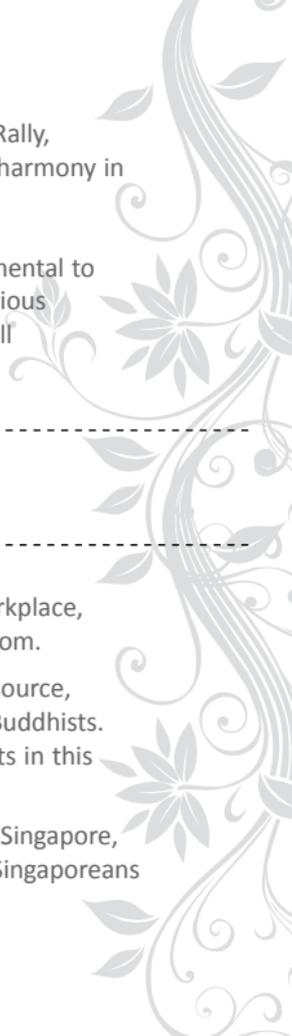
## 02 | INTRODUCTION

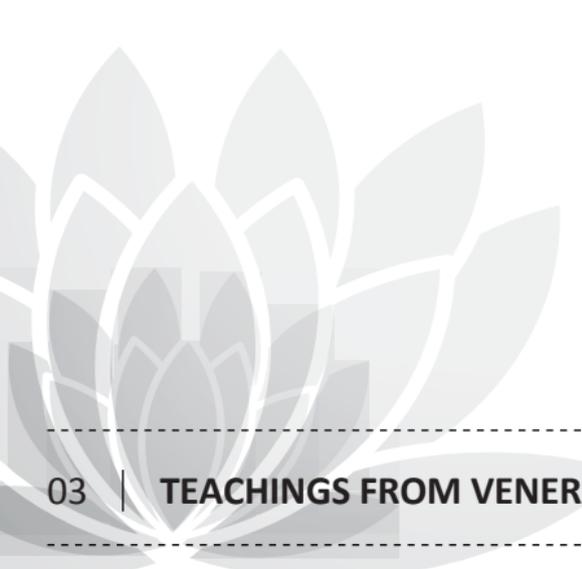
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The objective of this book is to support Buddhists who are facing proselytism in their workplace, school or even at home, so that they can maintain their stand with compassion and wisdom.

In the spirit of mutual respect, we, a group of Buddhists from the counselling, human resource, social work and teaching professions, have developed this material to share with fellow Buddhists. We have no desire or intent to cause any discomfort. We wish to state that the viewpoints in this material are solely our own.

Buddhists, who are just like everyone else, want happiness and do not want suffering. In Singapore, we are able to live well and practise our religions. Towards this end, may Singapore and Singaporeans continue to be safe, prosperous and enjoy a compassionate environment for one and all.





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## 03 | TEACHINGS FROM VENERABLES

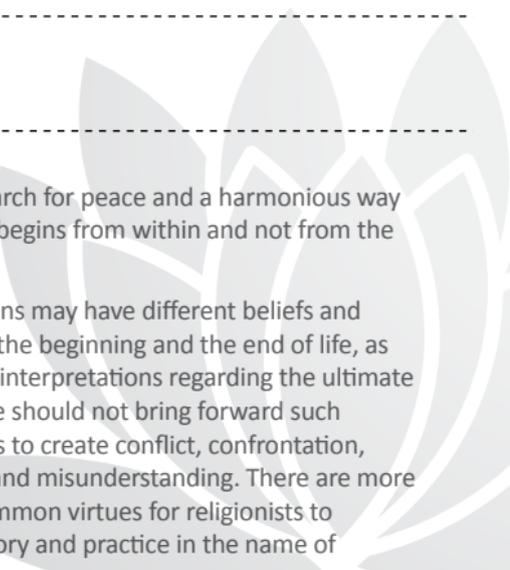
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### **What is the Buddhist Perspective on Religions?**

According to *Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda* in *“Buddhist Attitude Towards Other Religions”* (Pages 2-6): “Buddhism is a religion which teaches people to ‘live and let live’. In the history of the world, there is no evidence to show that Buddhists have interfered or done any damage to any other religion in any part of the world for the purpose of propagating their religion. Buddhists do not regard the existence of other religions as a hindrance to worldly progress and peace... The Buddha did not criticise or condemn any

religion other than to enlighten the people by showing them the futility of going into the extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence and to avoid superstitious and meaningless practices in the name of religion.”

“According to the Buddha, men are divided amongst themselves because of their strong sense of ego. When this is subdued by seeing the essential emptiness of a being, healthy human relationships will



develop. The search for peace and a harmonious way of life therefore begins from within and not from the outside.”

“Different religions may have different beliefs and views regarding the beginning and the end of life, as well as different interpretations regarding the ultimate salvation. But we should not bring forward such discordant issues to create conflict, confrontation, clashes, hatred and misunderstanding. There are more than enough common virtues for religionists to introduce in theory and practice in the name of

religion, so that people may lead a righteous, peaceful and cultured way of life.”

“The deep underlying meaning of religion is to be able to uphold and respect one's own religion without in anyway being disrespectful or discourteous towards other religions. To this end, we must establish mutual understanding, mutual co-operation and tolerance amongst all co-religionists in order to achieve religious harmony.”

conquered and exterminated. This is caused by human delusion, which then leads to revenge, bloody feuds, and an endless cycle of collective violence!” “The so-called “human delusion” mainly refers to two blind spots people have in their thinking:

1) When considering, observing or dealing with a problem, people only take into account their personal, selfish and subjective standpoints. Rarely do they try

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## 04 | TEACHINGS FROM VENERABLES

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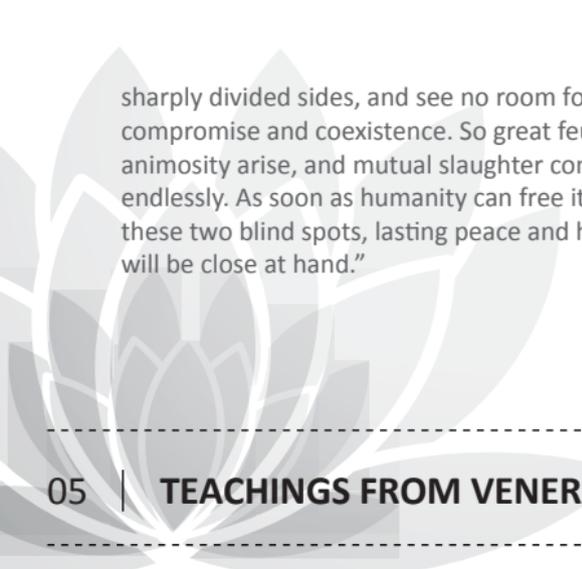
### **How can Buddhists develop deeper compassion and respect for people of different religions?**

According to *Venerable Sheng Yen* in “*Establishing Global Ethics*” (Pages 36-37): “As of today, there are still a few groups whose leaders, in their fervent love for their own group and in their desire to maintain their groups' interests and to attain more, greater, and better benefits, have developed antagonistic, hostile relations with other groups.

Such groups may attack or plunder one another, or even regard the opposing groups as demonic, to be

to understand, feel or have sympathy for the other party's ideas, explanations, ways of doing things, or needs based on circumstances. This often results in antagonism and hostility, which then leads to conflict and war.

2) In facing all manner of complicated situations and problems, people uniformly judge things in simplistic, dichotomous ways. People always think they stand on the side of the true, just and sacred, and that whoever or whatever disagrees with their faith and ideas is false, evil and demonic. They perceive two



sharply divided sides, and see no room for compromise and coexistence. So great feuds and animosity arise, and mutual slaughter continues endlessly. As soon as humanity can free itself from these two blind spots, lasting peace and happiness will be close at hand.”

others’ opinions aren’t important. Others’ criticisms don’t hurt the Dharma or the Buddha. The path to enlightenment exists whether others recognise it as such or not. We don’t need to be defensive.

In fact, if we become agitated when others criticise Buddhism, it indicates we’re attached to our beliefs – that our ego is involved and so we feel compelled to prove our beliefs are right. When we’re secure in what we believe, others’ criticisms don’t disturb our

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## 05 | TEACHINGS FROM VENERABLES

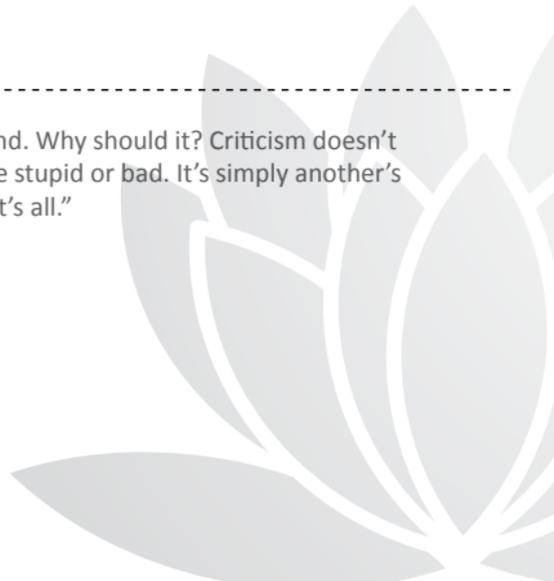
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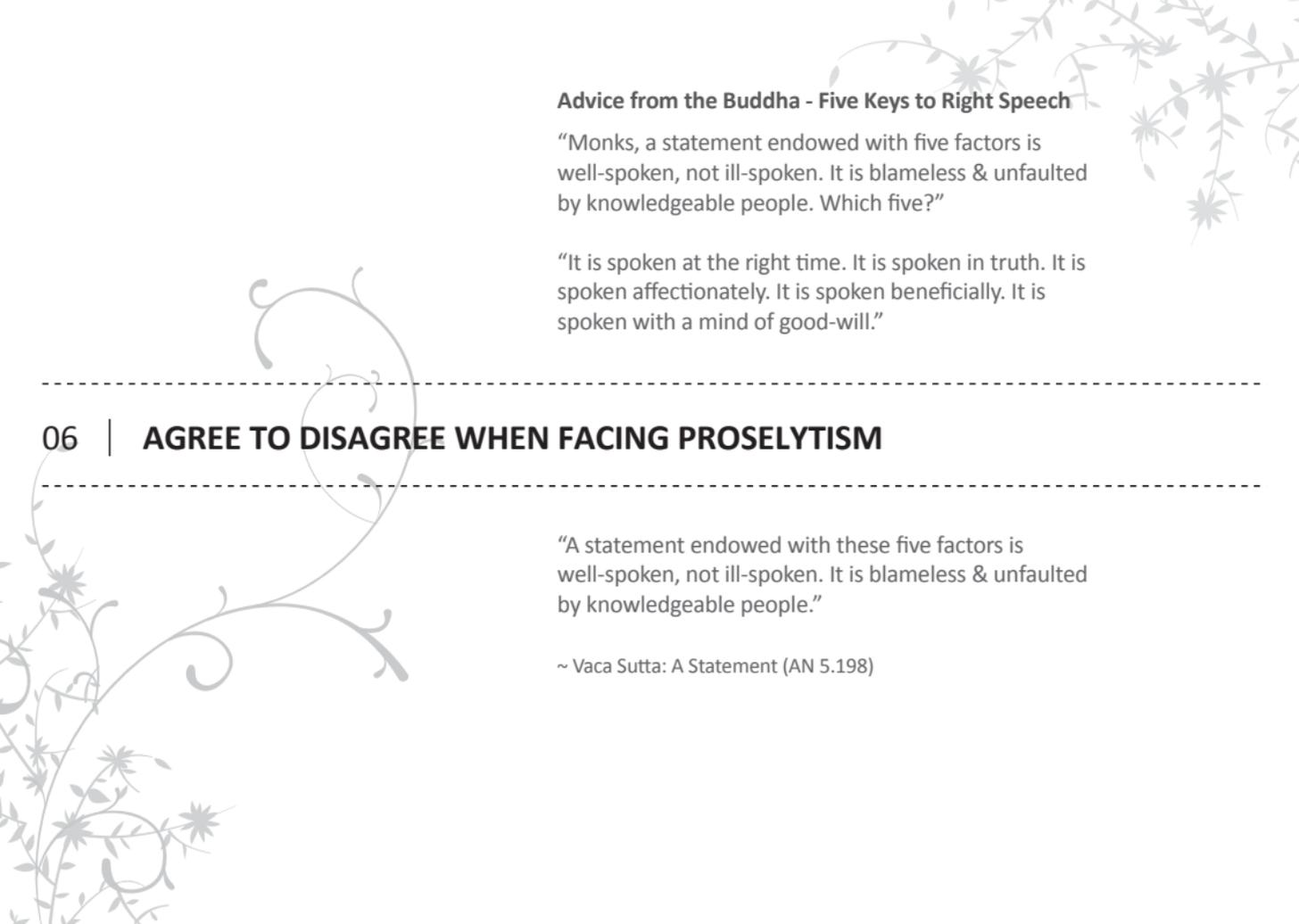
### **What can we do when people criticise Buddhism?**

According to *Venerable Thubten Chodron* in “Q&A: Working with Anger”: “That’s their opinion. They’re entitled to have it. Of course, we don’t agree with it. Sometimes we may succeed in correcting another’s misconceptions, but sometimes people are very closed-minded and don’t want to change their views. That’s their business. Just leave it.

We don’t need others’ approval to practise the Dharma. But we do need to be convinced in our hearts that what we do is right. If we are, then

peace of mind. Why should it? Criticism doesn’t mean we are stupid or bad. It’s simply another’s opinion, that’s all.”





**Advice from the Buddha - Five Keys to Right Speech**

“Monks, a statement endowed with five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people. Which five?”

“It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will.”

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**06 | AGREE TO DISAGREE WHEN FACING PROSELYTISM**

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“A statement endowed with these five factors is well-spoken, not ill-spoken. It is blameless & unfaulted by knowledgeable people.”

~ Vaca Sutta: A Statement (AN 5.198)



### **What does it mean to agree to disagree?**

- We are open to listening to others' views because we are clear of our own beliefs.
- We respect others' opinions while standing firm with our own values and principles.
- We can engage others in dialogue and exchange perspectives without insisting that others accept our point of view.

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## **07 | AGREE TO DISAGREE WHEN FACING PROSELYTISM**

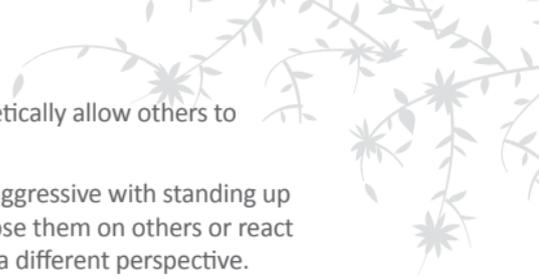
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If others try to influence us to adopt their religion, it is perfectly fine to stand our ground and turn them down.

### **Why should we agree to disagree?**

Being assertive in our inter-personal relationships and interactions is taking the moderate path between being passive and aggressive. When we are assertive with our views, we should communicate them in a clear, positive and firm way to others.

We should not be so passive with upholding our views



that we quietly and apathetically allow others to impose their beliefs on us.

We should also not be so aggressive with standing up for our views that we impose them on others or react angrily to those who have a different perspective.

### **How should we agree to disagree?**

Say “No” with Compassion:

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## **08 | AGREE TO DISAGREE WHEN FACING PROSELYTISM**

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1. Listen to the other person with respect and an open heart.
2. Understand that he thinks he is trying to benefit us through his behaviour, even if we may not feel this is the case.
3. Clearly state our stand, e.g. simply say, "I am a Buddhist."
4. If the occasion is not appropriate (e.g. stopped by a stranger on the street), there is no need to explain or clarify our religion in return. There is also no need for any heated exchanges. Simply end the conversation.
5. Politely walk away if the proselytiser continues to impose or becomes too unfriendly.

**At Home**

**Scene 1:** Your family members or relatives try to persuade you to take up their religion.

**The proselytiser says:** As a family, it is important that we share the same religion and beliefs. Do come and join in my religious activities.

**Take 1**

**You say:** I understand that you care about me. Don't worry. In my religion I am taught to do good. I am not harming myself or others.

**Take 2**

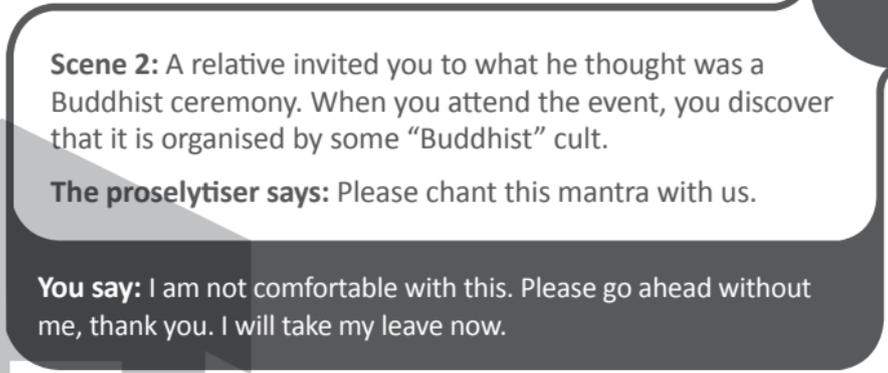
**You say:** I have a different view. As a family, I think each of us can have different religion and belief. Being respectful of each other's religion is important too.

**Take 3**

**You say:** Although we don't share the same religion and belief, why don't we join each other's religious activities to increase mutual understanding and support?



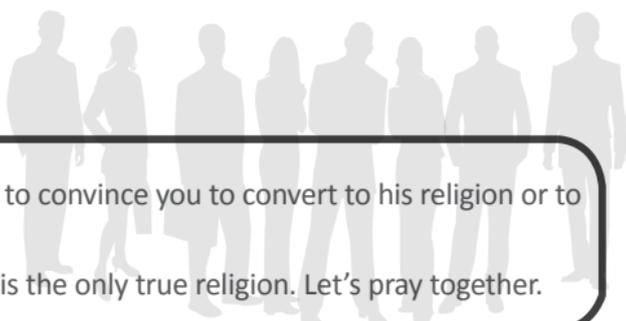
At Home



**Scene 2:** A relative invited you to what he thought was a Buddhist ceremony. When you attend the event, you discover that it is organised by some “Buddhist” cult.

**The proselytiser says:** Please chant this mantra with us.

**You say:** I am not comfortable with this. Please go ahead without me, thank you. I will take my leave now.

**At Work**

**Scene 1:** Your boss or colleague tries to convince you to convert to his religion or to do a prayer together.

**The proselytiser says:** Trust me, this is the only true religion. Let's pray together.

**Take 1**

**You say:** I respect your beliefs and I hope you can respect mine.

**Take 2**

**You say:** Thanks for sharing about your religion. I am a Buddhist and my practices are different from yours.

**Take 3**

**You say:** Thanks. I am a Buddhist. If you don't mind, I can do a Buddhist prayer together with you.

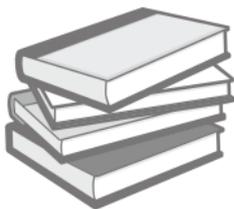


**At School**

**Scene 1:** Your child is a student in a mission school. As such, he is expected to take part in prayer sessions, religious classes, masses, etc. Your child is uncomfortable with these religious practices and would like to be excused from them.

**The proselytiser says:** If you do not want your child to take part in these religious practices, you should not have sent him to this school.

**You say:** According to the guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education for mission schools, these religious practices/sessions must be optional and admission to the school cannot be contingent on taking part in such activities.



At School

**Scene 2:** The teacher proselytises and aggressively asks you to go to his place of worship. (There is an obvious power differential in the teacher-student relationship, and the teacher should not be exploiting or abusing that differential.)

**The proselytiser says:** I have your interest in mind. You should attend this prayer group/place of worship because it is the only true way.

**You say:** Thank you for your kindness. I'm a Buddhist and I've no interest in going to your place of worship.

*If the teacher persists in persuading you to attend his place of worship, you should raise this issue with the principal.*



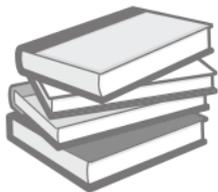
**At School**

**Scene 3:** Your peers aggressively ask you to attend prayer group/their place of worship.

**The proselytiser says:** If you are my friend, you will attend my prayer group/place of worship.

**You say:** Thank you for your kind invitation. I’m a Buddhist and I’ve no interest in joining your prayer group. Please respect my religious beliefs in the same way that I respect yours.

*If you are studying in a secular government school and you are uncomfortable with your peers conducting prayer group meetings within the school compound, please inform your teachers.*





**In Public:  
On the  
Streets**

**Scene 1:** A stranger approaches you. You can see that he is holding religious pamphlets.

**The proselytiser says:**  
Good morning, can you help me do a survey?

**You say:** No, thank you.

*Smile and politely walk away.*



**In Public:  
On the  
Streets**

**Scene 2:** A stranger approaches you to share about his religion.

**The proselytiser says:**  
Good afternoon. Have you heard of X religion?

**You say:** I have heard of it. I am a Buddhist, thank you.

*Smile and politely walk away.*



**In Public:  
Service  
Providers**

**Scene:** You are with a Buddhist relative who has been hospitalised and is not in any capacity to make decision. A stranger from another religion approaches his bed.

**The proselytiser says:** Do you want to convert to my religion?  
You will be saved.

**You say:** No, my relative is a Buddhist.

*You may then report to the hospital staff.*



## **1. Continue and uphold my Buddhist learning and practice**

The best way to achieve confidence in the Dhamma and compassion for others is to continue learning and practising Buddhism with good teachers and spiritual friends. Let us strive on to uphold Right View and the Noble Eightfold Path in our daily lives.

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## **17 | WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?**

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## **2. Prepare for my future – make a will**

One can make a will to clearly state the desired funeral arrangement in accordance to one's religious practice. Please refer to the Singapore Law Society website for more details on writing a will:

[http://www.lawsociety.org.sg/public/you\\_and\\_the\\_law/making\\_a\\_will.aspx](http://www.lawsociety.org.sg/public/you_and_the_law/making_a_will.aspx)

### **3. Maintain peace and harmony in the family** ***When a loved one is in hospital***

If our loved one is hospitalised, we can request for the hospital or hospice to put up a sign at the patient's bed to state the patient's religion and turn down any offers for prayers or meetings with other religionists. If there are different views between family members, we

warm community in which to live." (Concluding Address for the *International Conference on Religious Cooperation*)

### **4. Protect myself as a citizen to practise my religion** **- The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act**

The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act safeguards us against insensitive proselytising and

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## 18 | WHAT ELSE CAN I DO?

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may ask the Medical Social Worker at the hospital to help mediate the differences.

#### ***Advice from Venerable Sheng Yen***

"In an open society, one may find several different faiths even within a family. We must respect, even support, each other's choices with an attitude of appreciation, and should never criticise other faiths based on our own subjective standpoint. We should cooperate to create a harmonious, peaceful, happy and

acts that incite inter-religious misunderstandings or subversive activities. The act empowers the Minister of Home Affairs to issue restraining orders against leaders and members of religious groups.

If we feel harassed by a person or an organisation's proselytization, we may consult the police or our Member of Parliament on what we can do as citizens. We may also consult our Dhamma teachers on the Buddhist perspective.

### **What is Buddhism?**

Buddhism is a religion to about 300 million people around the world. The word comes from 'budh' (to awaken). It has its origins more than 2,500 years ago when Siddhattha Gotama, known as the Buddha, was himself awakened (enlightened) at the age of 35.

### **How Can Buddhism Help Me?**

Buddhism explains a purpose to life. It explains apparent injustice and inequality around the world and it provides a code of practice or a way of life that leads to true happiness.

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## **19 | BUDDHISM**

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### **What did the Buddha Teach?**

The Buddha taught many things, but the basic concepts in Buddhism can be summed up by the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, Dependent Origination and the Three Characteristics of Existence.

*The above is adapted from the BuddhaNet website. Find out more at [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net).*



## COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM

*Adapted from a National University of Singapore Buddhist Society's article*

### 1. **Misconception: Chanting is meaningless and useless**

Buddhist chanting or recitation has definite meanings with specific uses. There are many types of recitations. The loving-kindness recitation helps practitioners to radiate loving-kindness to other beings. Chanting is also an aid to meditation. By focusing on the act of recitation, chanting helps to stop the mind from wandering and instead cultivates concentration. The recitation of sutta is also a skilful means to expose

Buddhists to the actual teachings of the Buddha, leading them onward to more in-depth study and understanding of the wisdom towards liberation.

### 2. **Misconception: Buddha is a god**

Buddhism does not subscribe to the theistic concept of God that is common to the monotheistic faiths. We believe that everyone has the potential to develop into a Buddha – a perfected being free from greed, hatred and delusion.

### **3. Misconception: Nibbana/nirvana cannot be understood**

Nibbana is not meaningless. In conventional terms, nibbana is freedom from the underlying cause of all suffering – the wrong view that we exist independently as an intrinsic and non-changing self. The word 'nibbana' literally means 'blowing out', like extinguishing a flame. It's the extinguishing of

present. Kamma does not mean that we are dealt a fixed destiny that we have to passively accept. Our kamma continuously changes depending on how we think and act in the present moment. By constructively changing our thoughts and behaviours, we can create the necessary conditions to transform our lives for the better. It is especially important to remain positive and virtuous in our thoughts and behaviours in adverse situations.

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## 21 | **COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM**

*Adapted from a National University of Singapore Buddhist Society's article*

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all greed, hatred and delusion, leading to extraordinary clarity and peace.

### **4. Misconception: Blame everything on kamma/karma**

Kamma does not entail fatalism. The word 'kamma' literally means 'action'. It refers to our volitions manifested as actions of body, speech or mind. What we experience presently, both good and bad, are determined by our thoughts and actions in the past (even if it was just a few moments ago); and similarly, what we will experience in the future is influenced by our thoughts and actions in the

### **5. Misconception: Women are inferior and to be born as one is seen as a punishment**

Buddhism does not regard women as inferior to men. In fact, the Buddha himself was explicit about treating men and women equally; he initiated women into the Sangha (the Buddhist monastic order) despite fierce objections. Sexist sentiments from individuals are generally derived from the attitudes of their cultures and not from the Buddha's teachings.

## 6. **Misconception: Reincarnation and rebirth are the same**

Reincarnation and rebirth are philosophically distinct concepts. Reincarnation is the belief that each individual has a soul, and that this soul will travel to another body after death. 'Rebirth', however, explains that there is no such thing as a permanent, non-changing soul.

oxygen, showing that there is no absolute identity of one flame with the other.

Rebirth is a natural consequence of actions and conditions that our bodies and minds go through. In a human body, old cells die off and new cells are reproduced repeatedly. The human mind is a non-physical phenomenon

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## 22 | **COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT BUDDHISM**

*Adapted from a National University of Singapore Buddhist Society's article*

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Each individual is a continuous aggregation of changing conditions that constitute the mind and body, much like how an old candle's flame is passed to a new candle just before the flame of the used candle goes out.

So is it the same flame or a different flame that has been transmitted to the new candle? In a way, we can conventionally say it is the same flame because of the continuity. But now the flame is burning with a new candle as its base, burning up new wax, wick and

that perceives, thinks, recognises and reacts. Upon death, this conditioned consciousness establishes itself according to kamma in one of the six realms of existence, namely the realm of gods, demigods, human beings, animals, hungry ghosts and hell beings. Our actions in this life determine our rebirth upon death. The endless cycle of rebirth is a result of our delusion to the true nature of things and will cease when this ignorance is removed. The cessation of ignorance is enlightenment.

*“Bhikkhus  
(Monks)! If others  
should malign the  
Buddha, the Dhamma and the  
Sangha, you must not feel  
resentment, nor displeasure, nor anger on  
that account.*

*Bhikkhus! If you feel angry or displeased when others malign  
the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, it will only be harmful to  
you (because then you will not be able to practise the Dhamma).*

*Bhikkhus! If you feel angry or displeased when others malign the Buddha, the  
Dhamma and the Sangha, will you be able to discriminate their good speech from  
bad? “No, indeed, Venerable Sir!” said the bhikkhus.*

*If others malign me or the Dhamma, or the Sangha, you should explain to them  
what is false as false, saying ‘It is not so. It is not true. It is, indeed, not thus with  
us. Such fault is not to be found among us.’”*

*Bhikkhus! If others should praise the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, you  
should not, feel pleased, or delighted, or elated on that account.*

*Bhikkhus! If you feel pleased, or delighted, or elated, when others praise me, or the  
Dhamma, or the Sangha, it will only be harmful to you.*

*Bhikkhus! If others praise me, or the Dhamma, or the Sangha,  
you should admit what is true as true, saying ‘It is so. It is  
true. It is, indeed, thus with us. In fact, it is to be  
found among us.’*

*~ Excerpt from  
Brahmajala Sutta*

*• Feeling of pleasure or delight due to faith in and devotion to the Buddha is  
meritorious. But when the feeling of pleasure or delight is tainted with personal  
attachment to the Buddha, it becomes demeritorious. Thus it will be an obstacle  
in practising the Dhamma, and will be harmful to the striving for enlightenment.*

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