



Buddhism: a Way of Life and Promoter of Social Welfare

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Abstract

The Buddha's life and His teachings have inspired individuals practising Buddhism to develop self-reliance, moral responsibility, tolerance, compassion, wisdom and many other qualities that make life more meaningful to live. Along with these qualities, an understanding of the true nature of things will enable the Buddhist to live in harmony with a changing world and to enjoy the highest level of happiness. If all try to cultivate and control their minds, irrespective of creed, colour, race or sex, the world we live in can be transformed into a paradise where all can live in perfect peace and harmony. The Buddha never expected people to accept and adopt His teachings out of 'blind faith' and superstition. Instead He encouraged a free spirit of questioning and contemplation. This paper looks at Buddhism as a way of life and a promoter of social welfare.

Keywords: Buddhism, Social Worker, Life, Peace, Harmony

Buddhism is a religion as well as a way of life.

Dhamma the Buddha taught is, “that which supports”; it is the truth within us, relying upon which and by practising which, one can cross over the ocean of troubles and worries. Dhamma is no creed and there are no dogmas. The Buddhist is free to question any part of Lord Buddha’s Dhamma. Indeed the Teacher has encouraged his disciples and followers to do so. There is nothing in Buddhism to forbid questioning. No teaching in Buddhism advises the disciple just to close his mind and to blindly believe.

Introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is attributed to Arahath Mahinda, the ordained son of the great Indian Emperor Asoka. Arahath Mahinda came to the island around the middle of the 3rd century BC. The chronicles vividly describe the first encounter between Arahath Mahinda and King Devanampitissa of Sri Lanka in Minintale or the “Missaka Pawwa”, the simple looking but sharp questions around the mango tree which the Arahath asked the King to examine the latter’s level of intelligence before preaching Dhamma to him and the eventual conversion of the King to the Buddhist way of life. Arahath Mahinda preached the King from the contents of ‘Chullahasti-Padopama Sutta’, from Majjima Nikaya. The following advice he gave the King in this encounter is widely publicised even in modern times:

O Majesty, the birds that glide the skies and animals that roam the forest have an equal right to live and move anywhere in this country as you have. The land belongs to the people and all other living beings; you are only its trustee.

This could perhaps be, at least one of the oldest, if not the oldest, pronouncements in the world focusing on responsible governance, with a clear commitment to maintaining nature’s sustainability.

On King Devanampiyatissa’s invitation, and using the necessary facilities he had provided, Arahath Mahinda had stayed in the then capital city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka for the rest of his life. From the time of King Devanampiyatissa, Buddhism came to be considered the religion of the King and his people. Building on the strong foundations laid down by Arahath Mahinda and his team, over the succeeding centuries, Buddhism flourished in the country with government patronage. The ancient history of Sri Lanka shows how, many different kings who ruled the country since the arrival of Arahath Mahinda, and the ministers, administrators and military establishments under these kings, together with the ordinary people of the country have made Sri Lanka primarily a Buddhist Kingdom, tolerant nevertheless of other small religious groups who came to settle down in the country at different times.

Buddhism established a way of life in Sri Lanka both at the individual level and at the community and societal level. At the individual level Buddhism and Buddhist clergy taught the importance of the mind in human behaviour. The monks showed by example and by precept how to tame the mind for good living. If all try to cultivate and control their minds, irrespective of creed, colour, race or sex, the world we live in can be transformed into a paradise where all can live in perfect peace and harmony.

As a way of life at the individual level, the Buddhist teachings on the four *Brahma-vihara* (Sublime States) are of great significance. These are a series of four Buddhist virtues and the meditation practices made to cultivate them. The four Brahma Vihara are:

1. Extending unlimited universal love and goodwill or loving kindness (Pāli: *mettā*, Sanskrit: *maitrī*) to all living beings without any kind of discrimination and with good will towards all;
2. Compassion (Pāli and Sanskrit: *karuṇā*) that results from *metta*, identifying the suffering of others as one's own.
3. Sympathetic joy (Pāli and Sanskrit: *muditā*) in others' happiness. This refers to the feeling of joy because others are happy, even if one did not contribute to it.
4. Equanimity (Pāli: *upekkhā*, Sanskrit: *upekṣā*) in all vicissitudes of life. This indicates an even-mindedness and serenity, treating everyone and all events impartially.

In addition to these Buddhist way of life would value the **spirit of free inquiry**. The Buddha encouraged people to investigate the truth of His teachings for themselves before accepting his ideas. He never expected people to accept and adopt His teachings out of 'blind faith' and superstition. Instead He encouraged a free spirit of questioning and contemplation.

Buddhism also stresses the importance of **self-reliance** and individual effort. There are the two main ways that Buddhists focus on self-reliance. Firstly, each person must work out for themselves the way to end their own suffering and attain happiness. And secondly, it is up to each person to realize that it is their own actions that determine their future. In Buddhist thinking, an individual's destiny is not determined by an outside power but by the way he/she lives his/her own life. This means that every one of us is responsible for our own actions. Every one of us can progress or develop only as much as our own efforts allow.

Because Buddhism respects the right of all people to inquire freely and to make their own choices, it also teaches **tolerance** toward other faiths and ways of life. Buddhist students are taught to live in harmony with everybody, regardless of race or religion.

The ten *paramithas* or perfections shown as the human qualities developed through many lives to attain *Nibbana*, the ultimate aim of the Buddhist, were seen by even ordinary Buddhists as valuable human qualities. The ten *paramithas* have thus become a way of life at the household level. These ten *paramithas* are:

- *Dana* (generosity),
- *Sila* (moral/ ethical Conduct),
- *Nekkahamma* (renunciation),
- *Pranna* (wisdom),
- *Viriya* (energy)
- *Khanthi* (patience),
- *Sacca* (thoughtfulness),
- *Adhishthana* (determination),
- *Meththa* (loving kindness) and
- *Upekkha* (equanimity).

The Buddha's life and His teachings have inspire individuals practising Buddhism to develop self-reliance, moral responsibility, tolerance, compassion, wisdom and many other qualities that make life more meaningful to live. Along with these qualities, an understanding of the true nature of things will enable the Buddhist to live in harmony with a changing world and to enjoy the highest level of happiness.

In addition to guiding individual life in family and community environments, Buddhism has also laid down principles for the behaviour of the King or in today's context the President or any other national leader. Four ways in which a leader of a society ought to treat his community are indicated. Referred to as *Sathara Sangraha Wasthu* they are: *Dana* – giving away, *Priya Vachana* – pleasant words; *Artha Charya* – working for the benefit of the public and *Samanathmatha* – equality.

Combining some of the good human qualities identified in Buddhism into a listing of ten items, the Buddha preaches “ten duties of the king or in today's parlance, the government”.

- *Dana* (generosity, charity)
- *Sila* (high moral character)
- *Paricchaga* (sacrificing for the good of the people)
- *Ajjava* (honesty and integrity)
- *Maddava* (kindness and gentleness)

- *Tapa* (austerity in habits)
- *Akkhodha* (freedom from hatred)
- *Avihimsa* (non-violence)
- *Khanthi* (patience and tolerance)
- *Avirodha* (non-obstruction)

These are no doubt elements of ideal government but in the long history of Sri Lanka, there are records of righteous kings who attempted to follow these “good governance principles”. Even in more recent times there were Prime Ministers and Ministers who tried to approximate these principles, in the midst of widespread corruption and other malpractices.

Of all these governance principles, one which comes out strongly in Sri Lanka, producing certain unique features in the Sri Lankan political economy is the *dana* principle appearing in ten *paramitha*, in *Sathara Sangraha Wasthu* and the ten duties of the king. In community practices during most festive seasons groups of people organize *dan sal* where food of various kinds is offered totally free of charge to any person willing to accept. These *dan sals* would sometimes be held for days and thousands of people may partake food from them, irrespective of their social status.

The *dana* principle has been extended to government policy from the time of ancient kings and adopted in modern times and continued up to date. Free education and free health (of course in the midst of fee levying private services) are valued social services in during the entire post-independence Sri Lanka. Staple food items have sometimes been offered by the government to people at subsidized prices. Valuable irrigation water, collected in reservoirs at enormous costs by the ancient kings and modern democratic governments are distributed to farmers free of charge. Of these government practices, some, operated nowadays to win public support at election times, arose in Sri Lanka centuries earlier than the introduction of any electoral system of government and basically because of Buddhist culture and Buddhist influence on governance practices.

The state apparatus built up to implement these measures for the benefit of the poor is what has come to be called the Sri Lankan welfare state. This welfare state mechanism was extensively critiqued by policy advisors of a Western orientation but was continued in Sri Lanka, by government after government in the last many decades. Poor relief programmes (*janasaviya* and *samurdhi*) which combined “poor relief” with measures to promote savings and self-employment among the poor have been a striking feature of the Sri Lankan welfare state. The social impact of these welfare state measures, in terms of social development indi-

cators – infant mortality rate, life expectancy at birth, literacy rate, rate of availability of electricity facilities etc. – has been extensive and highly appreciated by those with social democratic persuasions. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is the study by Paul Isenman published in the *World Development* journal in 1980. This study showed how Sri Lankan people rose up to higher levels of social indicators than are “warranted” by the country’s low per capita income level. On this basis, he described Sri Lanka as occupying an *outlier* position vis-à-vis other countries in the world. Another unique feature, was the drop in the country’s poverty headcount ratio to as a low level as 4 per cent by 2016.

Buddhism shows us ways to welfare and happiness of all. It reveals to us the true nature of the world. The adherents to Buddhism are taught ways to maintain a right relationship between the self and the world and those in it. The basic Buddhist teaching is that the essential key element of the world is its constant change. Buddha taught that everything in the world is impermanent and that it is the failure to understand this true nature of life on Earth that leads to much of our unhappiness, suffering and trouble. Buddhism is a way to correct our view, conduct and expectations of life in order that we can bring an end to suffering and to share in the happiness, wisdom, peace and Nirvana that Buddha’s teaching that us to.

The core aim of Buddhism is to clear people’s vision so that they will see things as they really are. With this insight to the true nature of things, the Buddhist can then understand that there is no point in trying to change the world, but that they ought to change themselves and their attitudes about life. It is up to them to make changes that will lead to wisdom and happiness.