

BUDDHISM AND SOCIAL CONCERN

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1. Introduction

The Buddha was born at Lumbini as Prince Siddhartha over 2600 years ago in the *Sakya* clan. He had all the worldly luxuries for enjoyment and pleasure but after seeing a sick man, an old man, a dead man and finally an ascetic, he realized that this world is full of suffering and the worldly pleasures are useless. He renounced his household life, became a homeless recluse, underwent severe penance for six long years, and by attaining the Supreme Knowledge became the Buddha. He got the lasting solution of the perennial problem of 'suffering' (*Dukkha*) at Bodhgaya; but he did not retire to the forest life. He was deeply involved in thinking for the suffering human beings and that was the reason, he went to Sarnath to share his knowledge with his erstwhile companions who later came to be known as *Pañcavaggiya Bhikkhus*. When the number of his disciples rose up to sixty and all became 'Arahantas', the Master dispatched them to different directions with the sole aim of doing good to all the beings.

2. The Concept of Buddha's Teachings

Thereafter the Buddha himself left Sarnath and throughout 45 years of his age remaining mendicant life continuously wandered through various regions of the northern India preaching for well being of the sentient beings. During this missionary span of time the social justice and harmony may be understood in the light of the Buddha's teaching.¹ He was deeply disheartened over the practice of discrimination among human beings on the caste basis. He out rightly discarded it and tried to replace the social stratification of the then Indian society from the angle of birth to the consideration of deeds which is evident from this beautiful verse:

*"Na jacca vasalo hoti na jacca hoti brahmano /
Kammuna vasalo hoti kammuna hoti brahmano //"*²

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¹ Prof. B. Labh in his unpublished article, *Buddhism and Social Harmony*.

² Dr. Bhikkhu Dharma Rakshita (ed. & tr.), *Vasalasutta, Suttanipata*, Verse no. 21 & 27, Delhi: Motilal Banarsi Dass Publisher, p. 34.

No doubt for the Buddha too, Brahmana remained the supreme, but his concept of Brahmana was entirely different. It was indeed based on purity of action irrespective of any caste, as we find in Dhammapada:

*“Na jatahi na gottehi na jacca hoti brahmano /
Yamhi saccam ca dhammo ca so suci so ca brahmano //”³*

We also see that the followers of the Buddha strictly followed these teachings in their practical life as it is evident by this incident. It is said that once Ananda went for the alms. On the way he felt thirsty and was searching for water. He found a well and came near it for drinking water. A girl of very low caste was drawing water from the well. Ananda requested her for water, but she said, “I belong to Matanga caste, sir”. Ananda replied, “I did not ask for your birth, sister, I asked for water”.⁴ Generally speaking, Buddhism developed five main arguments against social stratification— biological, evolutionary, sociological, ethical and spiritual unity of mankind. Biologically, all human beings are from one single caste. Evolutionary argument throws light that how caste name originated as mere conventions. With division of the nature of job or work such conventional grouping becomes necessary. Third argument is based on sociological considerations. In a society one finds two caste systems and in some other societies there is no caste system at all. Ethical and spiritual arguments reveal the privileged position desired by some communities in order to maintain their status in the religious sphere.

However, it is to be mentioned here that though the Buddha did not believe in the birth based caste, he did not condemn the social order based on caste either. He perhaps believed that the divisions in a society into groups was the result of historical and economic reasons and did not affect the moral climate much. The Buddha says, “Just as, brethren, the great rivers— Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati and Mahi— when they have fallen into the great ocean, lost their individual identity and is known as the great ocean, in the same way, O brethren, do the members of these four varnas— Ksatriya, Brahmana, Vaisya and Sudra when they began to follow the Doctrine and Discipline as propounded by the Tathagata, they renounce their different names of caste and rank and become members of one and the same order.”⁵

However, he did not stop here. Rather he talked of developing a sense of equality, loving-kindness, and compassion towards one and all; which could be possible only when one gives up the notion of false complex of superiority and inferiority and treats everybody just like himself. The Buddha support to freedom

³ Dhammapada, Verse No. 393.

⁴ E.J.Thomas, *Life of the Buddha*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas Publisher Pvt.Ltd., 1993, p.242.

⁵ Anguttaranikaya quoted by Dr. K. Dhammaratana in “The Social Philosophy of Buddhism”, p. 101 and by Dr. Suraj Narain Sharma in “Buddhism Social and Moral Education”, Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2011, p. 48.

of women to reach at the higher spiritual realm and love for animals and nature is deeply reflected in the Pali scriptures.

3. The teachings of the Buddha with the Social Concern

The concept in Dhammapada for the restoration and establishment of non-violence in the society and leading humanity towards global peace is obvious as the Buddha proclaims:

*“Na hi verena verani, sammantidha kudacanam /
Averena ca sammanti, esa dhammo sanantano //”⁶*

This indicates that Buddhist concepts of non-violence, love, compassion, good-will etc. are the foundations of human life. It is because, when we cultivate such feelings in ourselves, we enter the state of eternal satisfaction and we feel the whole universe as our own family. The verses dealing with hatred and its appeasement are of special significance. If anger is met with anger and hatred with hatred, there is no end to struggle and scuffle. This is the reason, the Buddha advices for having company of good friends, who could show and suggest noble ideas and useful path.

*“Na bhaje papake mitte, na bhaje purisadhame /
Bhajetha mitte kalyane bhajetha purisuttame //”⁷*

Further, the Buddha advices not to insult and harm others and thereby help in strengthening the bond of mutual respect among human beings:

*“Anupavado anupaghato patimokkhe ca samvaro /
Mattaññuta ca bhattasmim pantañca sayanasanam /
Adhicitte ca ayogo etam Buddhan sasanam //”⁸*

The Buddha, also, dissuades man from indulging into war, indulging into as according to him, war further results in disharmonizing social understanding. War breeds hatred and the defeated person undergoes suffering (humiliation); but one who has got pacified from war, enmity, hatred etc., experiences the real pleasure:

*“Jayam veram pasavati, dukkhaa seti parajito /
Upasanto sukhaa seti hitva jayaparajayati //”⁹*

⁶ Dhammapada, Verse No.5

⁷ Ibid., 78

⁸ Ibid., 185

⁹ Ibid., 201

Furthermore, there are numerous teachings in Buddhism connected to social concern, such as the four *Samgha Vatthu*. These are:

- *Dana* (giving, generosity, charity, donation etc.)
- *Piyavaca* (kind, loving, pleasing, soothing and convincing speech etc.)
- *Atthacariya* (useful conduct, rendering services, life services, doing good etc.)
- *Samanatthata* (even and equal treatment, equality consisting in impartiality, participation and behaving oneself properly in all circumstances.)

According to Buddhism a constructive member of the society should possesses the following qualities or principles of conduct, such as:

- *Metta* (loving kindness, good will and amity, wish to help others etc.)
- *Karuna* (compassion): It gets expression through the acts like helping other people in escaping their suffering, determination to free all beings both human and animal from their hardships and miseries.
- *Mudita* (appreciative gladness and selfless joy): On when seeing others happy one feels glad; when seeing others doing good actions or attaining success and advancement, one responds with gladness and is ready to help and support them selflessly.
- *Uppekha* (Equanimity): seeing things as they really are with a mind that is even steady, firm and fair like a pair of scales; understanding that all beings experience good and evil in accordance with the causes they have created, ready to judge, position oneself and act in accordance with principles, reason and equity.

A person who follows these teachings will bring happiness to the whole society. Thinking in terms of Buddhism, while social action is encouraged, it should always stem from skillful mental states. Any social action, no matter how seemingly worthwhile, will be ruined if it becomes tainted with unskillful intentions. So, all actions should be performed carefully, with an awareness of the real intention behind it.

One with moral virtue or *Manussa-Dhamma*,¹⁰ who can be rightfully called civilized conducts himself as follows:¹¹

¹⁰ Qualities that make one human.

¹¹ Bhikkhu P.A. Payutto, **A CONSTITUTION FOR LIVING: Buddhist principles for a fruitful and harmonious life**, Thailand: Sahathammika Co. Ltd., 2006, pp. 17-19.

A. He has the threefold *Sucarita*: (good or proper conduct):

- i. *Kaya-sucarita* (righteous bodily conduct): he does things that are virtuous and proper; he has good bodily conduct.
- ii. *Vaci-sucarita* (righteous speech): he says things that are virtuous and proper; he has good verbal conduct.
- iii. *Mano-sucarita* (righteous mentality): he thinks things that are virtuous and proper; he has good mental conduct.

B. He abides by the noble qualities (*Ariya-dhamma*): by practicing properly according to the ten courses of wholesome action (*Kusala-kamma*):

● **Three of the body:**

- 1. Abstaining from killing or taking life, oppression and harassment; as well as possessing kindness, compassion and helpfulness.
- 2. Abstaining from filching, theft and exploitation; as well as respecting the property rights of others.
- 3. Abstaining from misconduct and violation of other's loved or cherished ones; not abusing them, disgracing or dishonoring their families; as well as respecting their chastening and showing due respect.

● **Four of Speech:**

- 1. Abstaining from false speech, lying and deception as well as speaking only the truth, not intentionally saying things that stray from the truth out of a desire for personal gain.
- 2. Abstaining from malicious speech inciting one person against another; as well as speaking only words those are conciliatory and conducive to harmony.
- 3. Abstaining from coarse, vulgar or damaging speech as well as speaking only polite and pleasant words.
- 4. Abstaining from worthless or frivolous speech; and speaking only words that are true, reasonable, useful and appropriate to the occasion.

● **Three of mind:**

- 1. Not being greedy; not focusing only on taking; but thinking of giving, of sacrifice; and making mind munificent.
- 2. Not thinking hateful and destructive thoughts of having a destructive attitude toward others; but bearing good intentions toward others, spreading good-will and aiming for the common good.

3. Cultivating Right View (Sammaditthi): understanding the law of kamma that good actions bring good results and bad actions bring bad results; having a thorough grasp of the truth of life and the world; seeing the faring of things according to causes and conditions.

These ten qualities are variously known as kusala kammapatha (wholesome courses of action), dhamma-cariya (principles of virtuous living) and ariya-dhamma (noble qualities).

C. **At the very least he observes the five precepts:** The ten basic principles of conduct mentioned above are a comprehensive description of the moral conduct or noble qualities through which personal development of body, speech and mind can be made, for those who are not yet firm in these noble qualities. However, it is recommended that at least moral restraint through body and speech should first be developed by observing the *PañcaŚīla* (five precepts), which are among the first factors of the ten principles for virtuous living (dhamma-cariyā). In Dhammadika Sutta, also, we find the observance of five precepts by one and all continuously on all days. “Now I tell you of the life which a householder should lead, of the manner in which a disciple should conduct himself well such duties as are peculiar to the mendicants cannot be fulfilled by one who has a family writes T.W. Rhys Davids”¹² The five precepts are:

1. *Panatipata Veramani*¹³ (Abstaining from killing): not taking life or doing bodily harm.
2. *Adinnadana Veramani* (Abstaining from taking what is not given): not stealing, pilfering or filching; not violating the property of others.
3. *Kamesumicchāra/ Abrahmacariya Veramani* (Abstaining from sexual misconduct): not violating the loved or cherished ones of others, thereby destroying their honor and dignity and confusing their family life.
4. *Musavada Veramani* (Abstaining from lying): not telling lies or using deceptive speech; not deceiving other people or causing harm to their interests through speech.
5. *Suramerayamajjappamadatthana Veramani* (Abstaining from alcohol and intoxicants): not taking wines, liquor, intoxicants or addictives, which are causes for heedlessness and drunkenness, and lead to damage and blunders such as accidents due to lack of mindfulness. An intoxicated person at least threatens the sense of security and well-being of fellow community members.

4. Conclusion

¹² T.W. Rhys Davids, **Buddhism**, pp. 137-38.

¹³ “*Tattha panoti volharato satto, paramatthato jivitindriyam. Panassa atipato panavadho panaghato panatipato, attathato...Vadhakacetana.*” Vimanavatthu-Atthakath (Paramatthadipani), Igatapuri: Vipassana Research Institute, p. 57

It can be said that in order to create a harmonious atmosphere, we need to generate a good and kind heart not only for ourselves but for the whole humanity. The human qualities as mentioned and preached by the Buddha like equanimity, compassion, good-will, love etc. must be cultivated and sustained through systematic means of life. Such qualities needed to be taught right from childhood. If we apply these teachings of the Buddha in practicality with a pure and focused mind, surely we can achieve the object of a quality life. Why, only, pure and focused mind because the Buddha says that mind is the forerunner of all activities. All type of thoughts arises in mind only. If evil thoughts come to one's mind, evil he will do and if noble thoughts come, noble deeds he will do.

*“Manopubbangama dhamma mano settha manomaya /
 Manasa ce padutthena bhasati va karoti va //
 Tato nam dukkhamanveti cakkam’va vahato padam /
 Manopubbangama dhamma mano sattha manomaya //
 Manasa ce pasannena bhasati va karoti va /
 Tato nam sukhamanveti chaya’va anapayini //”¹⁴*

Bibliography

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¹⁴ **Dhammapada**, Verse nos. 1-2.