

# **HUMAN NATURE AND PEACE: THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATION**

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## **Abstract**

An attempt was made to philosophically address the concept of peace in Theravada Buddhist philosophical viewpoint. In doing this, firstly, a Buddhist concept of man is discussed to investigate deeply into its nature to find out the place of peace. In this part, two important questions are asked: 1) what is human nature? 2) what is peace? Secondly, the relationship between human nature and peace is also discussed. According to Theravada Buddhist philosophical viewpoint, human nature is conditioned and thereby is peace. In this article, I, by virtue of human nature, argued that the peace in question whether it is impermanent or permanent is a human being's product and the only peace produced by human being is the only peace that we really need especially in global society.

**Keywords:** Human; Peace; Theravada Buddhist

## Introduction

At the present, we live in the global community where all countries somehow become borderless and accessible. All communities, developed, undeveloped or even developing are connected in some ways. In this, we always share everything; we share innumerable sets of culture, educational curriculum, communication, information, pictures, sports including senses of hatred and love. It is said that our ways of life have been rapidly changed and gradually shaped by our ability to share with others. On the one hand, the more we share the more happiness we get, on the other hand, the less we share the less happiness we become. Now, the ability to share something becomes normal but the ability to share many things becomes intelligent. Under such circumstances, it seems that there are no problems people are facing with in such society; people live happily and peacefully.

However, what obviously appear are totally different from what exactly are. We have many intractable problems making people dissatisfactory such as exploitation, political instability, deforestation, deep ecological crisis, global warming, climate change, economical recession, racism, human trafficking, ethnic conflict and genocide, water crisis, food crisis and food unsafety and moral crisis etc. By and large, people have been struggling to live in such society through any means whichever available. Members of one family fight each other for what they keenly desire for leading to social unrest and thereby this level of conflict has also been brought to national as well as international level. It can be said that all these problems have been bringing about a great deal of suffering to human beings, rich or poor. As a result of those problems, the same voice 'peace' has been being widely articulated. People want to have peacefulness both in internal and external dimensions. In internal dimension, people need to have a peaceful mind; they do not want to be frightened by any cause. As regards to external dimension, they want to live peacefully; they can go here and there without any interruption and fearfulness, basic needs should be provided for them; they can work and earn in accordance with their skills, in other words, they can live their life as they really wish.

According to Buddhism, the root causes of those problems are attachment or unlimited selfish desires. Motivated by desire, people cannot control their verbal action, bodily action and mental action respectively because they do not have mindfulness which acts as a controller of mind. Consequentially, those actions have been creating a hefty of disharmony to human beings and then to society as a whole. In order to know the mentioned peace, it is necessary to discuss about human nature in Buddhism in order to discover the exact causes preventing peace from being created.

## Human nature

According to Buddhist tenet, five groups of existence (*Samyuttanikāya*, 1999) are basically utilized to stand for a human nature or a concept of man. Based on these groups, it can be fairly said that these five aggregates of existence become human being or human being is nothing but five groups of existence. Those are as follows:

1. Rūpa-Khandha or corporeality: this stands for physical aspect of human personality. The Buddha when asked about matter (*rūpa*) has given the following answer that:

“And why, brethren, do you say body? One is affected, brethren. That is why the word ‘body’ is used. Affected by what? Affected by touch of cold and heat, of hunger and thirst, of gnats, mosquitoes, wind and sun and snakes. One is affected, brethren. That is why ye say “body” (Woodward, 2005).

The mentioned matter consists of two main kinds of elements: 1) four great elements, water, wind, earth, and fire, and 2) the derived material phenomena, hands, ears, for instance.

2. Vedanā-Khandha or feeling: This is an emotional aspect of man. Every man is not only born with sense organs but he is also born with feeling (*vedanā*) which is considered to be most essential quality of being a man. Man cannot be born without feeling (*vedanā*) and feeling is inseparable part of man. Man whose feeling (*vedanā*) is absent, he is declared as dead body.

In Buddhist principle, the word ‘*vedanā*’ of ‘*Vedanā-khandha*’ in *Abhidhamma* basically refers to an aggregate of feeling or sensation (*Vedanā*). The aspect of sensation or feeling such as happiness or pleasant (*Manāpa sukha*) suffering or unpleasant (*Amanāpa dukkha*) or indifference or neutral (*Adukkhamasukha or Avyākata*) is said to be a constituent of man’s personality. As far feeling is concerned, the contact (*phassa*) is a necessary condition for arising of such feeling, be it pleasant, unpleasant or neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

In *Samyuttanikāya*, the verse says:

“The four great essentials, brother, are the condition; the four great essentials are the cause in the designation of the body-group. Contact is the condition; contact is the cause in the designation of the feeling-group. Contact is the condition; contact is the cause in the designation of the perception group” (Woodward, 2005).

3. *Saññā* -Khandha or perception: This is a knowing capacity of man. *Saññā* is one of the important capacities of man. Due to consciousness we have experience which is not determinate. In order to communicate such consciousness, it is necessary that we should have determinate knowledge of the object and such determinate knowledge is possible because of *Saññā-khandha*. In Buddhist principle, the word '*Saññākkhandho*' in *Abhidhamma* actually refers to an aggregate of determinate knowledge (*Saññā*). Its function is to know the object of knowledge. It by its nature is inseparably bound up with all consciousness possessing six-folds as knowledge of the five physical sense-objects and of mental objects (Nyanatiloka, 1987). It is an establishment of knowledge of conditions and the characteristics of various objects; blue, green, black, strong, beautiful, sweet, loud, salty, for instance, such is the main cause for remembering that object (Phra Prayudh Payutto, 1995).

4. *Sanḥāra*-Khandha or mental formations: This is a socio-moral aspect of man. The *Pāli* word '*Sanḥāra*' is translated into English as 'dispositions' (Kalupahana, 1987) or 'mental formations' or 'volitional activities'. Thus, it embraces different shades of meaning which should be carefully distinguished. The most frequent usage of term 'formation' may be applied to it, with the qualification required by the context. Such a term may also refer to the act of 'forming' or to the passive state of 'having been formed' or to both (Nyanatiloka, 1987). In the aforesaid term, K. N. Jayatilleke, an eminent Buddhist Scholar in history, while dealing with the term '*Sanḥāra*', actually pointed to three senses by which the word is used. Firstly, when the word '*Sanḥāra*' is associated with the sense of volitions as in the sentence '*avijjā paccayā sanḥāra*', it implies that man's volitions are conditioned by their true or false beliefs giving rise to ignorance. In this context, it arises when man sometimes thinks rightly and does a good deed or thinks wrongly and commits a bad deed. Man treads in *Samsāra* like a blind man with stick, who sometimes goes on the right and sometimes on the wrong track in trying to get his destination. Secondly, when the word '*Sanḥāra*' is used; it also indicates man's conative or purposive activities. These volitions may be bodily processes and may include reflexive actions such as breathing as well as conditioned behavior, habits for instance. They may be verbal activities involving cognitive and discursive thinking in waking life or even in their dreams. Thirdly, it may be purposive thinking or ideation concerning impressions, ideas or concepts relating to feelings (Jayatilleke, 2000). Epistemologically speaking, the dispositions are an extremely valuable means by which human beings can cope with the experience of the world (Kalupahana, 1987). They are the psychological compositions, which stand for the variety of qualities, embellishing the mind, good, bad or indifferent which are guided by intention (*Cetanā*). In *Majjhimanikāya*'s definition, its aspect is active, 'forming' and

signified Kamma i.e., wholesome or unwholesome volitional activities of body, verbal and mind (*Majjhimanikāya*, 1999).

5. Viññāna-Khandha or consciousness: this is a cognitive aspect of man. Despite being interchangeability, one term can be used for another if the need and fitness of the occasion are met with. In *Abhidhamma* text, *citta* is precisely defined as the first one of four basic principles or ultimate truth: *Citta Cetasika Rūpa and Nibbāna*. So it can be claimed that *citta* occupies the most essential place in Buddhist philosophy as it becomes ultimate thing. In this part, *Viññāṇakkhandho* is not an entity which always exists, called consciousness but an aggregate of consciousness arising out of conditions and brought about contact (*phassa*) of sense organs (*indriya*) and sense objects (*visaya*). According to Buddhism, the nature of consciousness is conditioned and it is so named according to whatever condition through which it arises, from an account of eye and visible forms arises a consciousness and by virtue of this it is called visual consciousness (*chakkhu-viññāṇa*), for instance.

Having discussed human nature or a concept of man, it clearly showed that five groups of existence can be used to explain what is called ‘human being’ meaningfully. Let’s leave human nature aside so that we can further move to discuss a concept of peace.

### **A concept of peace**

In order to understand the concept of peace, it is necessary to dwell into Dhammapada where Buddha’s words are mentioned. Once the Buddha said that:

“Natthi rāgasamo aggi, natthi dosasamo kali;

Natthi khandhasamā dukkhā, natthi santiparaṃ sukhaṃ”  
(Dhammapada, 1999).

Its translations are given as follows: There is no fire which can be comparable to fire, there is no harm which can be comparable to anger, there is no suffering which can be comparable to five aggregates of existence, and there is no other happiness which can be comparable with peacefulness.

It is noteworthy to add some explanation of the word ‘santi’ in mentioned verse that in Dhammapada, etymologically speaking, this word actually refers to Nibbāna. Here, if the word ‘santi’ translated as ‘peace’ means Nibbāna or the extinction of thirst as such and then it automatically embraces the place of permanent peace where all defilements are completely put to an end. In the verse, the Buddha had talked about four analogies of things, fire with lust, harm with hatred, suffering with aggregates and peace with happiness which by its own nature contain opposite aspect of extreme quality. If we carefully

examine what those words are signifying then we can understand that the Buddha had been exerting his delineation to make followers fully realize the most significant analogy. Based on this, it would lead all followers to choose what is morally good and what is morally bad. It is by such analogy that one can make a demarcation among things surrounded.

### **Is peace real?**

As far as the concept of peace is concerned, a question arises: is peace real? In answering this, taking a close look at the aforesaid verse is required. A peace is real if it is a peace derived from annihilation of craving and vice versa; this means that there is no peace before Nibbāna, be it Nibbāna with the substratum of life remaining or without any substratum of life remaining. If the peace arises after Nibbāna, then it also shows that a peace is the product of human being's actions.

### **The relationship between human nature and peace**

In previous discussion, it has been shown that there is symbiotic relationship between human nature and peace in some aspect. A question is asked as to how they have connection with each other. According to Buddhism, a man acts through three actions, verbal action, bodily action and mental action. It is said that these actions are regarded as the picture of being a man; we are aware of a man because of these actions, without these, it is impossible to differentiate what a man is. While investigating deeply into human nature, it was found that a man consists of main essential aspects, namely mind and properties of mind. A mind functions as a thinking entity. In the meantime, properties of mind act as a shadow of a mind, it can be claimed that where there is mind, there are also properties of mind; both by nature inseparably exist. It should be noted that in analogy if the shadow is white and thereby mind becomes white, if the shadow is black and thereby mind becomes black. As far as properties of mind are concerned, they can be classified into two main important categories, wholesome and unwholesome. Motivated by wholesome properties of mind, a man's action is morally good and if a man's mind is motivated by unwholesome properties and thereby is morally bad. Under these circumstances, the mentioned peace is impossible; if it ever exists; it conditionally exists and is impermanent. What is permanent is the peace and what is impermanent is not the peace. Such an impermanent peace is by nature not the peace in a Buddhist sense at all. According to Buddhist doctrine, the peace prescribed by the Buddha is in the context of Nibbāna and only this peace is basically considered to be the real. This peace is beyond wholesome and unwholesome.

## Conclusion

Having discussed about human nature and the concept of peace in the previous section, it clearly showed that there is symbiotic relationship between them. The peace understood by people in global community, if it ever exists, is a conditional peace; it is not permanent because of human nature concerning good or bad. But the peace prescribed by the Buddha as a real one is Nibbāna. However, the peace, permanent or impermanent, can be actualized by human being's actions. Since the impermanent peace is not the real one then human beings are still encountering many difficulties in their live endlessly. The permanent peace has a longest way to reach as long as human nature possesses both sides, wholesome and unwholesome.

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