

THE RELEVANCE OF BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY IN THE 21ST CENTURY: A RETROSPECTION

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ABSTRACT

In Buddhist thought the central issue in life is neither philosophical in the sense of resolving ultimate mysteries nor religious in the sense of worship, grace and salvation. Rather, the prime concern is happiness and sorrow. There are moments of true happiness and fulfilment and moments of sorrow, frustration, irritation and despair. Whether it be the delights of heaven, the satisfaction of a task well done, the joy of unselfish love or the sweet taste of good foods, it is some sort of pleasurable experience or the expectation of such that makes life worthwhile and gives positive value to our existence. Conversely, be it the agonies of hell, the loss of loved ones, humiliation, physical illness or the dread of such things, there are moments of negative value that we continually struggle to avoid. The Buddha's teachings resemble those of science in that all things mental or physical come about through cause and effect, and pleasurable and painful mental states are no exception. Thus the solution to living is to understand those factors that produce desirable or undesirable states of mind and with such understanding guide our lives in such a way as to minimise the unwholesome while developing the wholesome to its maximum possible realisation.

KEYWORDS: Enlightenment, Nirvana, Noble Truths, Craving, Grasping

INTRODUCTION

Buddhist philosophy does not accept anything readily which may not be felt either by the senses or perception. My research paper is to explore whether the Buddhist philosophy is relevant for the today's modern technologically developed world.

Gautama Buddha identified the reality behind each and every phenomenon taking place in our Universe. He found that in this world there is nothing which is permanent and nothing which exists isolated but in fact everything co-exists. Buddha's teachings are broadly based on human himself. Humans are born and reborn and there is no end to this cycle unless one attains 'Nirvana'. He found that it was not only human but in fact the whole Universe that is created of ever changing phenomena. Buddha got enlightenment and he reasoned out a final feasible solution through his wisdom. He came to conclusion that it was due to birth that the humans has to go through despair, sadness, death and all other types of dissatisfaction. He explored this thought and relationship of birth and death and realized that the way to get rid of sadness and further death is to end the possibility of birth. So he searched the cause for birth. He found that its main cause was expectation. Why do we expect things in the world? Is it because of expectation? This was the relation he unraveled in his philosophy.

In today's era of technologically and scientifically developed world there are many facilities for pleasure but the people are physically and mentally dissatisfied and insecure. If observed as per Buddhist philosophy, both satisfaction and security are a state of mind which depends much on expectations. Security can be referred to both security of job and also

freedom from danger of life. When the mind is in peace and a sense of satisfaction prevails then it doesn't mean that the person is free of any fear or physical danger but it means that the threat is still there but the person feels safe. Gautama Buddha once said 'Mind is the forerunner and mental states are mind made'. This means mind is the most important thing in one's life. According to the Buddhist teaching, every human being is created of five components namely- form, feeling, perception, wisdom, and consciousness. Out of the five only 'form' is the physical means and the rest of the four are mental levels. These four mental states of mind are very important in contemplating man. It has been often ignored that in modern the modern era of science and technology producing much for the physical needs of man the mental factors, are not sufficiently recognized.

I think this is because of the philosophy behind science. However, it is one of the fundamental principles of science that we do not accept anything un-experimented with or and unobserved. This is the time for scientists to open out and think of the other dimensions of life such as Religion. A Religion like Buddhism, cannot be set aside any more. Most of the world population follow a religion. Therefore scientists should give a place to the experience of religion and should consider religious teachings as being integral to man. We can be certain, that Buddhism provides vast knowledge about man and his mental and physical development.

In the world today, there are many multinational and multipurpose projects which are vast for the development of countries. But people are not satisfied with what they have. There is no contentment. Craving, grasping, and arising and perishing are the main features in the world. As science is predominant in the world today, scientists can take a new step for the advancement of science through recognition of ethical and religious dimension. The Dhamma taught by the Buddha is not something outside the world and beyond experience. Therefore it is not contrary to science. The Dhamma realized by the Buddha is a discovery of the existing phenomena in the Universe. It is therefore a Universal truth, an everlasting truth about the Universe.

Science today has already established that certain teachings of the Dhamma are correct beyond doubt but it took a long time. It would take similarly a long length of time to obtain scientific proof of other aspects of Buddhism too. Consider a case of a man walking through an unknown jungle who has no food to satisfy his hunger; suddenly he sees a tree full of ripe fruits which he had not seen before. He has a doubt whether it is poisonous or tastes bad. He takes a small bite of the fruit and finds that it's sweet. Being a careful man, he waits quite a long time to see whether it has harmful effects on him. After a considerable length of time, he finds that the fruit is neither poisonous nor harmful. Then he eats the whole fruit. Similarly, instead of wasting time to obtain scientific proof of the other aspects of the Dhamma, would it not be wise to straightway accept that the whole of the Dhamma as a true teaching, and a way of life for mental and physical development, and which if followed would bring solace to mankind.

Even the span of life of a human being is limited. So an individual cannot wait to follow the Dhamma till the whole of the Dhamma is proved by science. It also must be mentioned that there are certain aspects of the Dhamma, which are extrasensory perceptual and are entirely beyond modern science. What Buddha taught is not only for the 6th century B.C. but it is relevant to this modern world too. Today, however, the world witnesses a level of civilization and social complexity far surpassing that of any previous era. Yet out of the great thoughts and discoveries of our time, no new major religion has evolved. Whatever new religious concepts may have appeared, they have failed to reach the masses of humanity in the form of altering basic beliefs and practices. Most of the new reforms that modern institutions sometimes announce with pride are actually negative in character that is, the termination of outmoded practices and the relinquishment

or reinterpretation of embarrassing dogmas.

Rather than new religions, we find for the first time mass atheism, skepticism, pragmatism, and indifference. True, these anti or non-religious attitudes existed in earlier times, even back into ancient Greece and India. But in olden times they were largely confined to select groups of philosophers or other exclusive minorities. Today these ideas have penetrated to nearly all social levels, regardless of education, among the advanced nations of the world. They are virtually an instituted dogma in the communist nations, while in Europe and America they have insidiously encroached upon the traditional forms of religion. Educated members of the free Asian nations have begun to follow in the same direction.

It is not religion alone that seems threatened. Ethics, philosophy, metaphysics and mysticism also appear to wither before the onslaught of technology, industrialization, science and psychology. Such concepts as justice, virtue, infinite being and transcendental absolute that occupied the minds of the ancients are now challenged as being hypothetical at best. At worst they are said to be pure verbiage and syllogisms lacking empirical and experimental verification. And at this point the essential ingredients of metaphysics become lost. Mystical experiences, once regarded as communion with the infinite, now take the status of psychological phenomena, altered states of the nervous system better induced by chemistry than by meditation or prayer. Ethics as a philosophy suffers the same fate as metaphysics. Ethics as behavioral codes for conducting one's life are, in the eyes of traditional moralists, becoming mocked and disregarded. To those with less rigid standards they are becoming radically altered with new values appearing. Such are the features of the modern age. What then of religion? Even the newest of the existing major religions, Islam, is well past its first millennium. Christianity, rapidly approaches its two-thousandth birthday, while Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism all share roughly contemporary origins dating around 500 B.C. Judaism and Hinduism extend even further back into antiquity.

Only history will tell. Religion may not necessarily die. In Japan, one of the most modernised nations in the world, new and well organised sects with radical teachings have in a period of 20 or 30 years mushroomed to firmly embrace many millions of converts. Yet the nature of these sects appears to specifically relate to the emotional needs of certain segments of Japanese culture, and their impact outside of Japan has to date been negligible. Is religion anything more than a formalised displacement of human frustrations and insecurity, reinforced by indoctrination, utilising the human capacity to feel and shun guilt, and offering hope when human endeavours have reached their limits?

First of all, before any meaningful approach can be taken towards Buddhist position, one must clarify what form of Buddhism one is considering. The religious movement started in the Fifth Century B.C. by Gautama Buddha has, in the intervening centuries, taken on diverse forms and paths of development as it spread to new lands and cultures and intermingled with local beliefs and practices. Thus today we find different schools of Buddhism as unlike one another as they are from non-Buddhist religions. A Theravadan Buddhist monk may find himself closer in thought and spirit to a western psychologist than to a priest of the Japanese Jodo-Shin Shu sect.

I wish then to confine my discussion to the oldest known form of Buddhism that is, Theravada Buddhism which is the prevailing religion of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Ceylon. But I must be even more specific than this for I do not wish to discuss the various local traditions, ceremonies and later schools of thought that have become attached to Theravada. Rather I shall discuss the earliest known form of Buddhist thought i.e the teaching of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali language scriptures known as the Sutta pitaka and Vinaya pitaka. If one confines his attention to these earliest known Buddhist scriptures, the Western reader is often surprised by the contemporary ideas contained in writings that date back over 2000 years.

Perhaps most appealing to the modern mind (whether scientifically oriented or not) was the Buddhist emphasis upon free and rational inquiry. "Do not believe out of blind faith, do not believe merely on scripture, do not believe on mere tradition," said the Buddha. "Do not believe me just because it is I who speak. But when you have seen, examined and experienced for yourself, then accept it." Only the mind freed of vested interests and prejudices will really be able to see and truly understand. Thus we read: "If others speak against me or against our order, be not angered or dejected. If they praise us, be not elated. Rather analyse what has been said and weigh its merits." Buddha made full use of logic, debate and reasoning, and in so doing revealed a remarkable ability to resolve philosophical dilemmas that were purely semantic in origin. This he could do because his logic was based upon experiential data rather than metaphysical. He placed experience before logic in his quest for truth, and when he did use logic, it was based upon facts readily admitted by all. Instead of commenting upon ultimate reality, he spoke of craving and sorrow. He frequently declined to expound upon ultimate origins and post-mortem existence and instead spoke of ordinary human experience in the immediate present. For, he explained, it is only in the here and now that we can act and thus affect our destinies.

Thus Buddha taught no concept of a sin of disbelief. One is not damned because of a lack of faith, but rather suffers by one's own ignorance when one acts contrary to natural law. The Buddha never claimed divinity or a monopoly on truth. The truth was there for any man to find. His authority lay only in the fact that he had discovered it and could show others the way to this discovery. In order to explain the central concepts of Buddhist teaching and practice we should first note the way in which Buddhism views man and his relationship to the world about him. For regardless of the oft-noted discrepancies between belief and conduct, our world view cannot help but influence the way in which we approach life's problems. For example, a man who firmly believes that all things are made by and governed by a personal and loving God will most likely direct a large part of his efforts towards beseeching that God in times of crisis, if not at all times.

In Buddhist thought the central issue in life is neither philosophical in the sense of resolving ultimate mysteries nor religious in the sense of worship, grace and salvation. Rather, the prime concern is happiness and sorrow. There are moments of true happiness and fulfilment and moments of sorrow, frustration, irritation and despair. Whether it be the delights of heaven, the satisfaction of a task well done, the joy of unselfish love or the sweet taste of good foods, it is some sort of pleasurable experience or the expectation of such that makes life worthwhile and gives positive value to our existence. Conversely, be it the agonies of hell, the loss of loved ones, humiliation, physical illness or the dread of such things, there are moments of negative value that we continually struggle to avoid.

As already stated, the Buddha's teachings resemble those of science in that all things mental or physical come about through cause and effect, and pleasurable and painful mental states are no exception. Thus the solution to living is to understand those factors that produce desirable or undesirable states of mind and with such understanding guide our lives in such a way as to minimise the unwholesome while developing the wholesome to its maximum possible realisation. Consequently the central teaching of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths.

Impulses, feelings and desires determine our behavior and also our relative happiness or sorrow. Therefore, the purpose of the Eightfold Path is to produce by means of discipline, self-understanding and intellect a new and better human being and to enable one to progressively mature towards the relative or absolute realisation of specific psychological goals. These goals are both negative and positive. On the negative side one seeks the eradication of greed, hatred, egoism, delusion, apathy and anxiety. The positive goals are to cultivate and develop love, compassion, equanimity, wisdom and insight. Greed, hatred and other unwholesome mental states are not only predisposed to sorrowful

consequences; in addition they are in and of themselves agitating and discomforting. Conversely, love and compassion are more than forerunners of happy conditions; by their very nature they are meaningful and rewarding experiences.

As I have already stated, Buddhism regards the human mind as a compounded phenomenon of various attributes and qualities. Consequently, the techniques for development and purification of the mind must likewise be multi-dimensional and varied in accordance with individual needs. Educating the mind to right understanding; guiding speech, habits and profession into harmonious life patterns; cultivation of discipline and energy, and meditative stilling of the mind to bring about awareness of subtle thoughts and feeling that normally escape awareness; these are the techniques and practices by which one progresses along the Eightfold Path. This is the practice of Buddhism, the living of Buddhism as originally taught by the Buddha himself.

Buddhist ethical values develop as a logical consequence of what has just been discussed, and the result is a system of ethics founded neither upon tradition nor upon revelation. Acknowledging that actions are preceded first by thought and motivation, we see that good and evil originate from the mind. Thus, a mind that has realised the Buddhist goals of subduing greed, hatred and egoism while developing love, wisdom and compassion is a mind that will have a natural and spontaneous virtue. The need for arbitrary rules of conduct will be greatly lessened, and one's goodness will be genuine rather than enforced or premeditated. The great advantage of such an ethical system in the modern world is that it transcends but does not contradict the mores of cultural and national boundaries. At the same time it can be applied in a variety of different cultural circumstances with or without regard to tradition, history or taboo.

Therefore, while Buddhism proceeds from a very different set of premises than most other religions, we note a nearly complete agreement as to the standards of ethical conduct: love, kindness, charity and generosity are universally hailed by all of man's great religions regardless of whether their doctrines are built upon revelation, mysticism, metaphysics or psychological insights. Whether they teach divine creation or cause and effect, they all teach kindness. In addition, Buddhism takes a further step in this direction, that is, it teaches how to achieve these ethical ideals as living realities. It not only teaches to love; by psychological practices it tells how to achieve the genuine feeling that is love. For love and compassion, like all other aspects of this universe, arise through cause and effect.

In our discussion of Buddhism to this point, we see it as a system of psychological principles and practices that an individual can apply to the benefit of his own spiritual advancement and emotional wellbeing. Thus, the prime value of Buddhism in the modern world is that it shows one a way to happiness and peace of mind regardless of political and social environment. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the Buddha's doctrine was social and intra-personal to the exclusion of concern for human relationships and society at large.

The reason for emphasis upon individual development was founded upon the principle that the blind cannot lead the blind; or as the Buddha stated, "One, himself sunk in the mire of greed and delusion, cannot pull another out of that mire." One should first purify oneself to be able to show the way to others. The numerous instances in both ancient and modern times of religious and political atrocities committed by men who sincerely believed that they were serving the causes of justice and righteousness show the wisdom of this premise. We can only have a better world when we first have better people. Fear, jealousy, egocentrism, hatred and greed are the original causes of human strife, be it petty crime or global war.

Personality cannot be separated from society. While the sum total of personalities determines the character and

quality of a given society, conversely society influences and formulates the development of personality. This fact was readily acknowledged by the Buddha. He did not advocate social reforms such as we think of today but did deal directly with the social injustices of his time. Perhaps the best example is the caste system. He did not advocate a social revolution to replace this system, but any person who became a Buddhist ceased to have caste identity and thus was no longer subject to caste regulations. He thereby afforded men and women a way to escape from this social injustice, and at the same time he refuted the religious and philosophical rationalisations by which the priests and ruling castes attempted to justify the institution. In similar manner he opposed slavery and elevated the social status of women.

Recognising that civilizations have flourished under a variety of different political systems and that, because of the universal law of change no society or culture will endure forever, the Buddha did not advocate any particular type of government. When speaking of monarchies, he said the responsibility lay with the king, and the king should cultivate justice, charity, compassion and virtue, both for the prosperity of the nation and as an example for the government ministers and common citizens. A few democratic states existed at the time of the Buddha, and of these he said that they would continue to flourish so long as the citizens could assemble and meet in harmony and would maintain good moral standards.

In the centuries following the Buddha, his followers built hospitals and rest houses in accordance with his teaching of compassion. The great Indian emperor, Asoka, in the third century B.C. as a result of his conversion to Buddhism, stopped all wars and conquests, drained swamps, built wells and carried out other acts of public welfare. Other Buddhist rulers have followed this example. Buddha declined to preach his doctrine to a starving man until that man had been fed. And of illness he said: "Whosoever would honour me, whosoever would follow me, whosoever would take to my advice, he should wait upon the sick." And to his disciples he said: "Go forth into the world to spread the Teaching for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of all creatures."

Social ethics is but one aspect of the Teaching. Its primary concern is the reduction (and, finally, the elimination) of greed, anger, delusion and suffering. But these primary goals naturally and logically lead to a social ethic and one that operates independently of political, theological or doctrinal ideologies. For it works as follows: as men learn to lessen the greed, hatred and egoism that smoulder in their hearts, and as kindness and compassion gain prominence in human motivations, then will men strive to better the world in whatever way their immediate situation affords. For example, it may be food given to a hungry stranger, or it may be participation in a multi-million dollar campaign against world hunger.

CONCLUSIONS

Today in the 21st century, Buddhism continues to gain ever wider acceptance in many lands far beyond its original home. People throughout the world, through their own choice and analysis are adopting Buddhist ways of peace, compassionate and responsibility. The Buddhist teaching of the law of karma offers people a just, incorruptible foundation and reason for living a moral life. It is easy to see how a wider embracing of the law of karma would lead any country towards a stronger, more caring and virtuous society. The teaching of rebirth places this present short lifetime of ours in a broader perspective, giving more meaning to the vital events of birth and death. The understanding of rebirth removes so much of the tragedy and grief surrounding death and turns our attention to the quality of a life, rather than its mere length.

From the very beginning the practice of meditation has been at the very heart of the Buddhist way.

Today, meditation grows increasingly popular as its proven benefits to both mental and physical well-being are becoming more widely known. When stress is shown to be such a major cause of human suffering, the quieting practice of meditation becomes ever more valued. Today's world is too small and vulnerable for us to live angrily and alone, and thus tolerance, love and compassion are so very important. These qualities of mind, essential for happiness, are formally developed in Buddhist meditation and then diligently put into practice in everyday life. Buddhism is unique because we can talk about this 'religion' even without any reference to heaven or hell. I am sure that others cannot talk about religion in this way. The Buddha's message of goodwill and understanding to all beings is a universal message. The world today needs this noble message more than ever before in the history of humankind. Buddhism as a religion is the unique exposition of the absolute truth, which will show man how to live in peace and harmony with his fellow beings.

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