



SOCIAL ETHICS OF THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

Ashin Pandavansa

**Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies,
Acharya Nagarjuna University, Nagarjuna Nagar, Guntur, A.P, India.**

ABSTRACT

One of the Buddha's messages is "Mano Pubbangama dhamma" very beautiful words of the Buddha. It means mind is forerunner, mind makes everything, mind mould human life and mind is the master of a man. Human beings are architecture of their own life. So, in order to create a beautiful life, we should train our mind to be beautiful. Nowadays the whole world is not only full of the pleasant and unpleasant situations, but also miserable and pleasurable events which are generated by the evil and good mind. In many Buddha's messages, it is mentioned that the starting point of this miserable and pleasurable events is selfish and selfless thought of egocentric world. Ultimately, each society and individual is connected with their own mind of violence and peace in life. They may do so directly through their intention or indirectly by provoking a violent and peaceful response to their actions. This is called the law of nature and our action that no one can master. But, human being can lead the way to purify the mind by doing nothing evil and doing everything good.



This article aims to understand about Social norms of Buddhist human ethics in general and practical ways of human society in life. It is important to know the true meaning of human ethics as human beings are required to grow towards the state of human perfection.

KEYWORDS: social norms, mind, life, evil, good, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism should not be thought to be the ways of life for the Buddhist only, as it is sometimes wrongly understood. In a large number of Buddha teachings, the Buddha has given practical ways for the human life and sound advice to cope with life's difficulties. According to Buddhist social and ethical point of view, many of our problems are the result of bad or wrong action, speech and thought based on attachment (Lobha), anger (Dosa), and ignorance (Moha), etc. They could be well overcome by the good and right action, speech and thought based on non-attachment, loving-kindness, and knowledge, etc. Every action produces causes and effects.

BUDDHIST SOCIAL ETHICS:

The Buddha taught His ethical Doctrine aiming at an individual mind-centered. But he did not ignore the relationship between individuals of society. Society is made of a group of individuals. Without individuals a society does not exist. So the behavior of a person is very important role in a

society. If a person is in righteous, then the society will be of that nature. It is manifested that personal improvement is important for social development in every directions.

To illustrate, the Sigalovada Sutta of the Digha Nikaya is an important statement of Buddhist social ethics. In the Sutta, the entire human society has been classified into six social units. Each social unit is represented as personifying the six directions.

1. Parents and children are regarded to be the east.
2. Teacher and pupils are regarded to be the south.
3. Friends and relatives are regarded to be the north.
4. Wives and husbands are regarded to be the west.
5. Masters and servants are regarded to be the nadir.
6. Samanas and Brahmanas are regarded to be the Zenith.

Here, the eastern direction has been indicated to represent the parents. In Theravada Buddhism parents are highly regarded saying that parents are the Brahma. It becomes clear from above statement that parents are important in Society. The society that fulfilled all duties in the family can be peaceful co-existence. Therefore, Sigatovada Sutta shows that the parents fulfill their duties towards their children; in return the children also carry out their obligations towards their parents in the following manner;

1. Once supported by them, I will now be their support,
2. I will perform duties necessary on them,
3. I will keep up the lineage and tradition of my family,
4. I will make myself worthy of my heritage,
5. I will transfer merits in due time.

As the above mentioned parent and children society, other social units that fulfilled their social ethics can be performed in the directions of individual and society. According to this Sutta, all six directions interrelate or associate each other for the perfection of life. Thus, social duties in each personalizing these directions are indispensable human ethics in individual and society.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SERVICE IN BUDDHISM:

Buddhist teaching treasures the possibility of services rendered to society for the betterment of entire human race. Theravāda Buddhism believes that without personality development, it is difficult to serve society in the real sense of term. After attaining self-mastery through meditation, one has to go into the society for the welfare and betterment of people.

The Buddha advised the sixty disciples who had attained the Arahantship thus, "O monks! Travel around for the benefit of multitude of human beings ... (Caratha bhikkhave cārikam bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya)". This is the Buddhist concept that is found for the first time in the religious history of the world which touches upon the concept of social service. With the help of this message, he expounded the value of benevolence, and social service.

According to Buddhist teaching, for a complete realization of Nibbāna, wisdom has to be necessarily connected with compassion. They are complementary in the sense that they watch each other like Sīla and paññā, one hand washing the other hand (Sālaparidhotāhi bhāhmā paññāparidho). Compassion cultivated without wisdom could easily lead to emotional and sentimental involvement. Therefore, one has to cultivate both the wisdom and compassion equally. Compassion is based on the idea of the inter-relatedness of person to each other. The individual's existences are mutually linked or related to each other and therefore, naturally are mutual obligations to each others. In other word, our existences appear meaningful if they are put in reference to each other. Buddhist teaching of social welfare is based on this nature of inter-relatedness. Man is not a separate person; he is a part of society. Therefore, he has to respect and concern about the welfare of others. The Buddhist concept of duty and

responsibility is based on this social virtue. This type of virtue is symbolized as a relationship between man and society. It is a clear factor that thinking of promoting one's own welfare is not possible without cultivating selfless virtue.

According to Buddhism, one cannot put through his own egoistic disposition without acknowledging the aims of others. The moral goodness is identical with altruism. The Buddha held that the person who worked for the good of oneself as well as that of others was the perfect person in life (Attāhitāya ca patipanno parahitāya ca).

SOME MODELS OF SOCIAL ETHICS:

Buddhist social ethics is the foundation of the personality development. Ethics cannot be performed without the medium of society. Therefore, ethics can be applied to society in the forms of manners; negative and positive. For example, the five precepts are taken upon in order to abstain from some types of actions - those that are harmful to society. It is one kind of social work, but positively the person can practice some virtues which are good for the society. There are such 10 actions called Dasapuññākiriya:

1. Dāna – liberality
2. Sīla – morality
3. Bhāvanā – concentration
4. Apacāyana – paying reverence to deserving ones.
5. Veyyāvacca – rendering service to those it is due, retinue.
6. Paṭṭidāna – transference of merit
7. Pattānumodāna – rejoicing in and receiving others' merits.
8. Dhammasavana – hearing the Doctrine
9. Dhammadesanā – Educating others
10. Diṭṭhijjhu – self confidence

In this context, Dāna and Veyyāvacca can be taken into consideration that the Buddha really wants everybody to do other regarding actions. Almost all the lists of good actions incorporated in Buddhist teachings begin with charity. For instance, in Dasapāramitā, charity has been mentioned; in the Pañcadhamma (saddā, Sīla, Suta, cāga, paññā), charity is again mentioned. Charity is not confined to the donation of material things. It finds expression in various forms, because social service cannot be of one form. As long as there is diversity in the society, human needs too will be diverse. Therefore, social service has come to them in different ways. In this sense, Buddhist concept of Dāna too has the meaning of assisting others in different ways.

Buddhist concept of social service cannot be made intelligible without clarifying its value system. For, any concept of service presupposes an underlined system of values. According to the scheme of Buddhist values, the personality appears to be recognized as a key part of social work. It is mentioned that personality should be endowed with certain qualities. They are the four bases of benevolence – Cattāri sangahavattuni:

1. Dāna – charity,
2. Piyavācānā– pleasant speech,
3. Atthacariyā– useful service,
4. Samānattatā – equal privilege and respect for all.

Dāna is a readiness to sacrifice one's labor, wealth, knowledge, skill etc. Piyavācānā is affability. The individual has to be friendly and approachable. Dedication to the service of others is the third quality. Social worker has to put aside all discriminations, and adopts equal treatment for all. It is Samānattatā that has to be undertaken. This is the application of virtue of equanimity. In service, social worker has to abandon four forms of injustice (Agatigamanāyāni): favourism (Chanda), Prejudice (Dosa), fear (Bhaya), and ignorance (Moha). When one turns one's attention to above-

mentioned factors of personality advocated in Buddhism, there appears to be compatibility with the service and with the doer.

The most ideal self-cultivation in Buddhism is the path of Bodhisatta. The Bodhisatta's career is absolutely dedicated to the social service in the highest sense. The sole objective is to serve all beings to free from the suffering. Saving others spiritually is the culmination of great compassion. In Theravāda Buddhism, the Bodhisatta career consists of fulfilling the ten perfections (Pāramita)[In the Pāli Canon, the Buddhavaṃsa.]. They are; charity (Dāna), morality (Sīla), Renunciation (Nekkhamma), effort (Viriya), truthfulness (Sacca), patient (Khanti), determination (Addhittana), Wisdom (Paññā), Equanimity (Upekkhā) and thought of loving kindness (Mettā).

Though these practices are aimed at self-cultivation, these cannot be practiced without a society. Therefore, while an individual is self-cultivating, at the same time he or she is serving the society. This is the greatest social service because a Bodhisatta services expecting nothing in return from the society. The Bodhisatta is even ready to sacrifice all his comforts and happiness in his life for the welfare of others.

In Sigālovāda Sutta, the Buddha emphasizes that rights and justice are interrelated. When the rights are not well reciprocated by justice, moral imbalance is bound to result. Social service, according to Buddhist ethics, is a kind of duty. Compassion and loving-kindness are derived from above consideration.

Buddhism teaches two sets of virtues that are said to have important social implication. Both these sets of virtues are to be cultivated for the welfare of others. The first set is known as the four sublime abiding (Cattāro brahmavihārā) that consists of the cultivation of mental attitudes:

1. Loving-kindness (Mettā),
2. Compassion (Karuṇā),
3. Sympathetic joy (Muditā), and
4. Equanimity (Upekkhā)

The first factor serves as a strong motivation that compels an individual towards beneficial deeds. The social worker should possess the fitting moral attitude of mind. The second involves developing a compassionate heart. It motivates him to social action. The third factor is to have a mentality to share the happiness of others. If a social worker is inflicted with dispositions, such as jealousy, and malice, he or she cannot do social work. In actual fact, social service is dedicated to uplift living conditions. Therefore, he should cultivate Muditā. Upekkhā is a stable personality trait which enables a person to maintain a stable state of mind despite changing circumstances of life. When an individual practices the four altruistic virtues, there is no distinction between oneself and others in the ultimate level.

THE IDEAL SOCIETY:

Buddhism is a Homo-centric Religion, it means the Buddha' teaching focuses on human matters, human problems, human characters and human behavior, and these Dhammas deal with human relationship. No one doubts that human being is a social species. Man was born alone but for security, pleasure and happiness he joins others. Since he was born, he was placed in a family consisting of mother, father, and may be brothers and sisters. He has, in some way or other, influenced by them. Later on he is sent to school. There are teachers and other students to whom in due course he has to get accustomed to.

During his course of existence, he joins small or large groups of society, leaving his influence on, or being influenced by them. In this way he is not an absolutely isolated island. But associations and intimacies do not always provide security, pleasure and joy; but can also make him confused, upset and conflicts are bound to arise. Man must learn how to live harmoniously and happily among his fellows and his environment. Positive religious and ethical teaching is this art of living with wise reflection, understanding, toleration and responsibilities. Otherwise, if man just lives according to his instinctive

nature and impulsion, it would lead to many conflicts and suffering within each individual, among other individuals and society.

BUDDHIST ATTITUDE ON HUMAN RELATIONSHIP:

A message from the Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda Sutta throws some light on moral responsibility:

"Rahula, when you wish to do an action with the body (speech, or mind), you should reflect on that same bodily (verbal or mental) action thus: would this action that I wish to do lead to my own affliction, to other's affliction, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome action with painful consequences, with painful results? When you reflect, if you know this action would lead to your own conflict, or the conflict of others, or the conflict of both, with evil consequences, with painful results, then you definitely should not do such an action. But when you reflect if you see the action would not lead to any affliction, it is a wholesome action with pleasant consequence, pleasant result, then you may do such an action."

While you are doing an action, you should reflect...

After you have done an action, you should reflect... [M61, p-524]

This message obviously expresses a sense of moral responsibility for one's own actions and the consequences that would affect one or others. This sense of moral responsibility is based on wisdom, which are differentiated with the knowledge of good and bad, the knowledge of morality and immorality; and the ability to reflect on each action and its consequences.

In another Sutta, the Loving-kindness Discourse, a positive approach with concern to others is taught: "Mātā yathā niya puttam. āyusā ekaputtam anurakkhe, evam pi sabbabhūtesu, mānasam bhāvaye aparimānam." Thus as a mother, might guard her son, her only child with all her life. One should maintain boundlessly, one's good will for every living beings.

It can be said that two main principles leading to Buddhist social philosophy are wisdom (Paññā) and compassion (Karunā). Wisdom manifests in wise attention (Yonisomanasikāra) which is the cause for arising of right view reflection, and understanding things as they are (Yathābhūtam dassanam). The Buddha said: whatever wholesome states, all of them are rooted in the proper attention (Ye keci kusalā dhammā, sabbe te yonisomanaraka muditā). See things as they are or understanding is the higher degree of wisdom, it implies a discriminator but calm and equable mind without agitation caused by likes or dislikes.

Essentially, Compassion (karuna) and loving-kindness (metta) manifests in deep awareness of the suffering and need of other beings. Buddhist concept of compassion does not limit itself to humankind only, compassion should be suffused. To all living beings without discrimination. Mettā and Karunā are two of the four Brahmaviharas: Mettā is kindness and care for others as well as for oneself; Karunā is compassionate feeling at seeing the suffering of others and arousing a wish to remove or relieve their suffering; Muditā is sympathetic joy at seeing the success of others; Upekkhā is equanimity, by viewing that living beings have their own Kamma. If everybody practices these four ethical duties, this world would be a perfect place to live in.

CONCLUSION:

In the above mentioned facts, it is understood that the ethical norm, mutual obligations and precepts are essential for individual and society in order to develop the social welfare and the high standard of living. Through applied means of Buddhist social ethics, the perfection of human prosperity, material and spiritual development, and blameless happiness could be achieved. The Buddha's advice is 'Let us live happily, not hating those who hate us. Among those who hate us, let us live free from hatred. Let us live happily and free from ailments. Let us live happily and be free from greed; among those who are greedy. Finally all Buddhist social aspect of ethics is regarded with the teachings of the Buddhas: "Avoidance of evil, Performance of good deeds, Purification of one's thoughts."

The social ethics taught by the Buddha can bring about both developments of individual and society. Thus, this will enlighten human as to the nature of existence and to advise them how best to act for their own happiness and for the benefit of others.

REFERENCES:

1. Maurice Walshe, The Long Discourses of the Buddha (dīgha nikaya), Trans, fourth Ed, wisdom publication, Boston, USA, 2012
2. Bukkhu, Ñānamoli and Bodhi, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha (majjhima nikaya), Trans, fourth Ed, wisdom publication, Boston, USA, 2009
3. Bukkhu Bodhi, The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Sanyutta Nikaya), Trans, wisdom publication, Boston, USA, 2000
4. Bukkhu Bodhi, The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha (Anguttara Nikaya), Trans, wisdom publication, Boston, USA, 2012
5. Nārada Mahā Thera, A Manual of Abhidhamma, 4rd Ed, Published by the Buddhist Missionary Society, 123, Jalan Berhala, 50470 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1979
6. K. Sri Dhammananda, What Buddhists Believe, Expanded Ed, The Corporate Body of the Buddha Educational Foundation, Taiwan, 1993
7. Walpola Rahula, Sri, "What the Buddha Taught", Buddhist Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka, 2006
8. Ven. P.A. Payutto- A Constitution for Living: Buddhist Principles for a Fruitful and Harmonious Life, Buddhist Publication inc, Kandy, 2007