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ETHICS-BASED SOCIETY OF BUDDHISM

1. Introduction

What the Buddha had in mind was a new society based on *dhamma*. This latter term on the one hand stands for the entire body of the Buddha's teachings, theoretical as well as practical. On the other hand, however, more frequently it refers to his practical teachings, which, of course, presuppose the theoretical ones. Among the four noble truths, which summarize the Buddhist teachings, the first three (namely, the truths about suffering, its origin, and its stopping) may be considered the theoretical part, while the last one (namely the truth about the path) is the practical part. But these two parts are inseparable. In fact for the Buddha, a thoroughly practical minded man, the practical part of his teachings (which he called 'the path') was more important and urgent. His statements about the suffering, its origin and stopping are only a prelude to those about 'the path.' He diagnosed the illness of man as suffering (*dukkha*) caused by craving (*taṇha*); and he discovered that by getting rid of the cause, the illness itself can be cured, and that thus man can regain the state of health called *nirvāna*. The path is the remedy he prescribed for the cure of illness. But, as far as the patient – the suffering man – is concerned, what really matters is the remedy, the path. It is immaterial whether he knows or not exactly the nature and cause of illness, and whether he has or not a clear idea about the state of existence after the cure. All that he should immediately do is to take the remedy, to follow the path. Even about *nirvāna*, the final goal of man, the Buddha maintained that rather than discussing it theoretically one should take the path leading to it, and that as one attains to it one will realize what exactly it is. Hence the Buddhist stress what one should do, and what one should not do, which we call ethics (*dhamma*).

However, in Buddhism *dhamma* is not merely a set of individuals principles of ethics. Rather, it is the ultimate principle of ethics with reference to which a person and his deeds are judged to be good or bad, right or wrong. It is not, however considered a personal being. Instead,

it is the righteousness as such, the absolute goodness, which man should realize through ethically good actions. In the case of one who has already realized it—the Buddha, for example—his actions are expressions of *dhamma*, the righteousness. In general *dhamma* is the liberating principle which the Buddha claims to have discovered as well as realized and personified.

The centrality of the concept of *dhamma* in Buddhism is more than obvious. The word *dhamma* is a synonym for Buddhism so that the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath to a group of five Hindu monks has been described as *dhamma-cakka-pavattana-sutta*: the discourse which set in motion the wheel of *dhamma*. The Buddhist community called *sangha* is on the one hand the assembly of people who follow the principle of *dharma*, and on the other it is the place where the realization of *dharma* is made possible. One becomes a Buddhist because of his commitment to *dhamma*. Thus *dhamma* is the *raison d'être* of the Buddhist community, the *sangha*.

2. Authority of Dhamma

In Buddhism *dhamma* is the source of authority at all levels. Thus the Buddha derives his authority from *dhamma*, his followers get authority not because he authorized them, but because they are committed to *dhamma*, and the *sangha* as a whole has authority because it embodies *dhamma*.

It was his experience and the vision of *dhamma* which urged the Buddha to launch a missionary movement on behalf of the same *dhamma*. He had the confidence, too, like any other missionary, that the *dhamma* he carried, was really a serious one, and that its acceptance alone would liberate the mankind. It has been said that he was first uncertain whether the *dhamma* he had discovered could ever be communicated to others. He found the mankind so intent on its attachments and so engrossed in sensual pleasures that he thought his message, would be too deep for it to perceive, too difficult to see, and too hard to understand. Hence, as the tradition has it, he had nearly decided against attempting to convey his experience to the world. Brahma is then said to have appeared to him pleading with him to preach the new *dhamma* to mankind. Brahma is said to have argued that if Gautama refrained from teaching his *dhamma*, the whole world would be lost. This legend may be an invention of

Buddha's disciples who thereby tried to claim superiority for the new wisdom over the Brahmanic teaching. But it certainly indicates the Buddha's conviction that he possessed an insight which alone could save the world, and the sense of urgency with which he preached the *dhamma*. He preached it, and send his disciples to preach it "for the sake of the peace and happiness of the world."

What is more, Gautama spoke with the authority and force of a truth-bearer. It has been said about Christ that he taught not like the Scribes, but as one having authority. A similar claim for authority was evident in the way Gautama approached his first audience at Sarnath. He almost demanded to be heard, and forced his message on his hearers. The audience consisted of the five monks who had long left Gautama accusing him of going lax in his ascetical practices. Now seeing the same Gautama coming back to them, they naturally did not feel like taking notice of him, still less like listening to him. But as he came closer they could not resist the force of his "awakened" personality, so that as if prompted by an inner voice they greeted him and showed signs of respect due to a fellow monk. They addressed him by name and the title 'friend'. But to their surprise, Gautama protested at this point. He refused to be called a friend and be treated as a fellow monk. He said: "Monks, you should not any longer call me by name, nor treat me like a friend, for now I am an *arhat*, a *tathagata*, a fully enlightened one. I shall teach you *dhamma*. If you accept it, you too will attain enlightenment." The monks found it difficult to believe that Gautama, whom they knew to have been leading a very relaxed sort of ascetical life, had attained enlightenment. Nevertheless, they could not fail to note the confidence with which he preached, and they accepted his *dhamma* and leadership. This was the inauguration of the Buddhist community, the *sangha*. The force behind it was the Buddha's experience of *dhamma*, his authoritative preaching of it, and the hearers' submission to it in faith.

3. The Buddha: a Disciple of Dhamma

Here the Buddha's position is not that of an *avatar* of *Dhamma*, nor the creator of it. He is rather the bearer of it, one who has discovered it, and, still more, one who has realized it. He is not an incarnation of *dhamma*, but a medium of its entry into the world.

Dhamma is eternal and independent of the *Buddha* and of every one else. But it manifests itself in and through human beings like the Buddha, who would welcome it and commit themselves to it. Thus the Buddha did not pose himself as a saviour, but he invited the fellow human beings to pursue and realize *dhamma* and thus to become enlightened. Gautama did not think that the Buddhahood was his exclusive right, but that it was within the reach of all who would make an effort to realize it. He merely offered to show the path to realize it. Whoever would respond to his invitation, would form with him the *sangha*. The point of unity in it is the *dhamma*, which would also give them liberation, and equality with each other. By virtue of *dhamma* all the members of the *sangha* become authentic and authoritative.

The Buddha was considered a *cakravartin* (a king or emperor), not in a secular sense but in a moral/spiritual sense. He was the *dhamma-rajā*, the king of *dhamma*, and his was the kingdom of *dhamma* of which the *sangha* may be considered a manifestation. It is *dhamma* itself that reigns over this kingdom through the instrumentality of the Buddha. The function of the Buddha as a king was not to rule, but to teach *dhamma* and to persuade and inspire the disciple to realize *dhamma*, and the relation between Buddha the king and the disciples is one between a father and sons. The Buddha addressed the disciples 'my people' (*māmaka*). They were frequently called the Buddha's true or genuine sons (*putta orasā*=sons of the breast). But a more important point here is that the title of *dhamma-rajā* is not reserved exclusively to the Buddha, but all the members of the *sangha* who would realize and teach *dhamma* would be called a *dhamma-rajā*, and in fact everybody is called to attain to the status of a *dhamma-rajā*.

4. Dhamma: the Guide and Support

That *dhamma* is the guiding principle in *sangha* was made clear when the question of the Buddha's successor came up for discussion. Given below are relevant portions from the Buddha's farewell address:

What then, Ananda, does the *sangha* expect of me? I have preached the *dhamma* without any distinction between exoteric and esoteric doctrines; for in respect of *dhamma*, Ananda,

the Tathagata has no such thing as the closed fist of a teacher who keeps some things back. Surely, Ananda, should there be any one who harbors the thought, 'It is I who lead the brotherhood,' or 'the *sangha* is dependent upon me,' he should lay down instructions in any matter concerning the *sangha*. Now the Tathagata, Ananda, thinks not that it is he who should lead the brotherhood, or that the *sangha* is dependent upon him. Why should, then, the Tathagata leave instructions in any matter concerning the *sangha*? . . . Therefore, Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to *dhamma* as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in *dhamma*. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves . . . Those who either now, or after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves, relying upon themselves only and not relying upon any external help, but holding fast to *dhamma* as their lamp, and seeking their salvation in *dhamma* alone, shall not look for assistance to any one besides themselves, it is they, Ananda, among *bhikkhus*, who shall reach the topmost height!

In *Majjhima-nikaya* Ananda reported to Vassakara and Gopaka-Moggallana that the Buddha had not appointed anybody as his successor, and that no one was to take his place. Then they asked, "But as you are thus without a support, good Ananda, what is the cause of your unity?" Then Ananda replied, "We, Brahmins, are not without support; we have a support, O! Brahmins. *Dhamma* is the support."

As already mentioned, by *dhamma* is meant the whole of the teachings of the Buddha: his vision of empirical reality and life as *dukkha*, *anitya*, and *anatma*; vision of life as a process leading to the final liberation called *nibbāna*; the root cause of man's suffering as selfish craving (*tanha*); the way to *nibbāna* as consisting of the eightfold noble path which includes the supreme principles of *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *aparigraha*, *karuna*, *maitri*, and *upeksa*, and all other details described in *dhamma-vinaya* texts. Calm, peace, happiness, prosperity, universal friendliness and compassion, truth, non-violence, composure, etc are the catch words of *dhamma*. *Sangha* is the place where these ideals of personal and social life of man are practiced, and anybody committed to these ideals are members of the *sangha*.

The ideals that govern the *sangha* are not revealed from above nor are they dogmatically imposed on the members. They are what the Buddha claims to have discovered by his own efforts of long and continuous meditation and concentration of mind, and, therefore, he claims that they are within the reach of all other human beings who would make similar efforts. It is true that the ideals are beyond the ordinary operation of human reason; but by the practice of Buddhist meditation etc one can become enlightened so as to grasp these ideals and realize them. The Buddha insisted that the disciples should not accept his teachings blindly. They should try them for themselves and get convinced of their validity before accepting them. He is reported to have said, "Just as wise men (test a claim to be gold) by burning, cutting and rubbing (on a touch stone), my statements, O monks, should be accepted after examination and not out of respect for me." On one occasion he asks, "Would you, O monks, knowing and seeing thus say, 'our teacher is respected, we say out of respect, we say out of respect of our teacher (M. I. 264). The monks submit that it is not so.

5. Sangha at the Service of Dhamma

The establishment of *sangha* is significant for more than one reason. First of all it was something new in the Indian religious tradition. In the ancient Hindu system the communitarian dimension of religion was not enough stressed. The final liberation was considered more an individualistic affair, and even the life of *sannyāsa* was led by individuals resorting to remote and solitary areas. Except for the disciples who would approach the *sannyāsins* for instruction, there was no idea of religious communities. Therefore, *sangha* as a community of monks was a novel idea.

For the Buddha it was not merely the novelty of the idea of community life that was important, but the role it played in the practice of *dhamma*. It was a time when the old tribal republics were being replaced by the great monarchies like Koshala and Magadha. Along with this change in the structure of the society there was increasing urbanization as well as individualism. The latter expressing itself in the form of *taṇha* (selfish craving) which in turn generates the passions of *rāga*, *dveṣa* and *moha*, was the arch enemy against which the Buddha was fighting. He was inviting people to get rid of selfishness and to open up themselves to others. It was a call to realize the state of *anatta*,

selflessness, so as to become a *nibutta*-man, the *muni*, who is free from all egoistic desires and illusions:

Towards this ideal Buddhist teaching and practice directs and leads men. From the start one of the most important ways of achieving this was membership of the Buddhist *sangha*. For life in the *sangha* would indeed be a school of *anatta*, a continuous exercise in ridng oneself of the illusion of the empirical self and its importance; life in the Sangha is a mode of existence in which one has no private or personal possessions except the bare minimum of necessities allowed by the rule of the Sangha, and in which one is continually subject to the common mind and judgement of the *sanghas*. The Sangha thus provides the optimum condition for the realising of *anatta*; it makes available a new and a different kind of social existence not possible in mundane society, least of all in the society that was already becoming common in sixth-century B.C. north India.¹

6. Sangha: a New Humanity

Moreover, as Trevor Ling notes, *sangha* was not merely a substitute for the old tribal society; it was much more than the latter. For, while the tribal community was restricted to a territory, the *sangha* was supra-territorial or non-territorial. *Sangha* transcended the limits of time and space, and took on a universal dimension, and it admitted no distinction between the members in terms of caste and class. Those who joined the *sangha* were believed to be born into a new clan (*gotra-bhu*) "Buddhaghosa comments that this term 'gotrabhu' indicates a change-of-lineage'; he says it is the transcending of the (old), which he calls 'sense-sphere' lineage, which brings one into the (new) 'fine-sphere' lineage—or as we might render it approximately, into a new, spiritual lineage, or perhaps better, a transcendental lineage."²

One of the characteristic features of the *sangha* is the democratic set-up. In the Buddha's view the future of the *sangha* and of Buddhism itself would depend on the unity and concord of the members. He said: "So long, O bhikkhus, as the brethren assemble regularly, so long

1. Trevor Ling, *A History of Religion East and West*. (London and Baringstoke : The Macmillan Press, 1968; reprint 1977), pp. 97-98.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

as they meet together in concord, and carry out in concord the duties of the *sangha* . . . so long may the brethren be expected not to decline but to prosper." The absence of a monarchical head also is significant in the *sangha*. We have already noticed how the Buddha refused to appoint a successor to lead the community after his death. Instead he clearly said that the *dhamma* would be the guide for the *sangha*. Hence as he has envisaged it, the *sangha* is a community of persons guided and controlled solely by the principle of *dhamma*, and as such the members are all equal, and should act corporately. In making decisions about the life in the community every member has equality of rights. Difference between the members was recognized only on the basis of age and experience, and not on the basis of caste or any other ethnic considerations. The norm of superiority and inferiority was the members' personal merits and demerits resulting from his deeds. According to the Buddha, one is a *brahmin* not because one is born into a *brahmin* family, but because of his virtuous deeds; equally, one is *sudra* not because of his birth into a *sudra* family, but because of his own deeds.

The Buddha, just as he wanted to restore the republican spirit of the tribal society, wanted to stop the spread of the caste-system into the tribal society, and to discourage it altogether. He criticized the caste system and the Brahmin's claim for superiority from different angles. Against the Brahmin spirit of dogmatism, he taught the people to think for themselves, and to accept only those teaching of which they were personally convinced. In the place of the Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices, he recommended human virtues like compassion and friendliness. In the place of self-torturing austerities he proposed meditation and other psychic exercises which would help one to manage the emotions and tension, and thus to attain to a state of composure and calm. He totally neglected the function of priesthood in religion, and he himself did not a priestly role. He was more a prophet, a *guru* who would generously impart the saving wisdom to his disciples. In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, "Buddhism was a revolt against caste, priestcraft and ritualism."

7. A Universal Society

Membership in the *sangha* was open to all irrespective of caste and class. People from all castes and walks of life were admitted to *sangha*

and were treated on an equal footing. It may be mentioned that it was this universal outlook, which transcends the caste restrictions, that in recent times attracted Dr. Ambedkar and his three lakh and a half followers to Buddhism, and have given rise to the present Neo-Buddhism. The point is that under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar so many 'untouchables' discovered their human dignity and social status in and through Buddhism. It is this liberating power that makes Buddhism and the Buddhist Sangha relevant and meaningful especially in the Indian context of oppression and exploitation of the poor and underprivileged. It is with reference to this liberating power that Buddhism becomes a model for the Church in India.

Although the membership was open to all, in another sense the function of *sangha* was initially narrowly understood. To begin with, in the early days the Buddhist community was wrongly identified with the *sangha*. In other words, then to be a Buddhist meant basically to be a monk, and, moreover, to live in the *sangha* was considered a necessary condition for attaining *nirvana*. This understanding of the *sangha* and its function naturally prevented the majority of people from becoming full-fledged Buddhists, and from aspiring for the attainment of *nirvāna*. For it was neither practical nor possible for the vast majority of population to opt for a celibate life in monasteries. Therefore, Buddhism appeared to be the vocation for a few chosen people. The rest of the population was virtually outside the provisions of Buddhism. The householders and lay people found it beyond their reach. They were permitted to affiliate themselves with the Buddhist community only by supporting the monks economically, and by offering alms to the monks. Even so, they would be considered only as third rate members of the Buddhist fold. The acts of charity towards monks, such as alms-giving etc., would not be considered as sufficient in themselves for one to attain to the Buddhist perfection called *nirvāna*. For attaining *nirvāna* they had eventually to embrace the monastic life. Thus, in short, the function of *sangha* appeared to be very limited and narrow.

But about a hundred years after the death of the Buddha there was a broadening of outlook initiated by the *Mahasanghikas* (at the second Buddhist Council at Vesali), who may be considered the pioneers of the Mahayana school. In the changed outlook *nirvana* came to be understood as available not only to the monks in the *sangha*, but to all who would follow the Buddhist *dharma* to the best of their convictions and facilities. Thus there was no more the identification of Buddhism with the *sangha*.

8. Sangha, the Leaven of World

However, in the changed outlook, the significance of the *sangha* was not reduced, but was reinterpreted and doubled. In the new vision, in addition to being a vehicle of liberation for the few who actually enter it, the *sangha* is understood also as a sign of liberation. Its members displaying the Buddhist ideals through their lives in a concrete manner, persuade and inspire the society at large to pursue them earnestly. The Buddhists also believe that the monks – the *sangha* – exert a saving influence on the surrounding society by radiating their heightened morality. Above all the *sangha* now is presented as the prototype – the Ideal – of the human society: a state of affairs in which there would be perfect love and compassion, sharing and understanding, freedom from passions, equality of members, mutual respect and acceptance, happiness and prosperity, peace and satisfaction.

Universal Ideals

It has been mentioned that in the process of social change the *sangha*, or even the Buddhist community at large, acts like leaven or like a catalyst by radiating goodness rather than by social works or such other programmes. But it does not mean that the Buddha and his followers did not or do not have a clear vision of what the world society should be like ideally. The Buddha has left clear instructions on the ideals of every section of the society.

The Buddha certainly preferred the republican system of government to the monarchical one. But even in a monarchical system he would like the King to be at the service of *dhamma*. He is not advocating theocracy. There does exist the distinction between the State and religion. But both of them are subservient to the same *dhamma*. There is also a great difference between the Hindu and Buddhist understandings of *raja-dhamma*. In the Hindu tradition based on Kautalya's *Artha-sāstra* what motivated a king is his *caste-duty*, and the fulfilling of his duties is considered an obligatory means for him to attain *mokṣa* (liberation). But as the Buddha viewed it, the King should discharge his royal duties not primarily for his own sake but "for the sake of the peace and happiness of the world." That is, the primary duty of the king is to ensure the peace and happiness of the people by bringing about the 'kingdom of *dhamma*' on earth. In *Anguttara-Nikaya* :

The Buddha is represented as saying to the members of the *Sangha*, 'Bhikkhus, the king of who rolls the wheel of state, a *Dhamma-man*, a *Dhamma-king*, rolls indeed no unroyal wheel.' One of the *Bhikkhus* then asks, 'But who, Lord is the king of the King?' The answer given by Buddha is 'It is *Dhamma*, *O Bhikkhu!*' The Buddhist-king, – the *Dhamma-King* or *Dharma-rajā* – that is the kind of king whose rule is envisaged as necessary for the implementing of the Buddhist scheme for society, is the king who rules in subordination to one power only—that of the eternal universe *Dharma (Dhamma)*.³

The Buddhist lay ethics is described in *singala-vada-sutta*, where the reciprocal duties of different groups of people in the society are listed: those between parents and children, pupils and teachers, husband and wife, friends, masters and servants, and between householders and monks. Visualizing a society in which the members faithfully discharge their respective duties as mentioned in *singala-vada-sutta*, T.W. Rhys Davids says, "We can realize how happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges, where the people were full of kindly spirit of fellow feeling, the noble spirit of justice, which breathes through these native and simple sayings."⁴

Regarding the attitude of the Buddha to religion (or rather to other religions), we have already said that he was strongly critical of the Brahmin dogmatism, ritualism, caste-discrimination, and priestly domination. Religion, according to him, should be human and humane, rational and practical, social and communitarian, and it should instill in the people a sense of self-reliance and commitment to principles. However, the Buddha was very understanding and sympathetic towards the 'simple faith' of the common man (*puthujjana*). Leaving a broad margin for their ignorance or lack of wisdom, the Buddha would readily tolerate their superstitious beliefs and practices. "Buddhist tolerance towards folk beliefs ... may be seen to have had educative effects; it made easier a gradual and gentle infusion of Buddhist notions, in such a way that the original folk-beliefs were, over a long period, imperceptibly transformed and made to nourish Buddhist attitudes and to serve Buddhist religious goals."⁵

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 177–8.

4. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhism*. London, 1890, p. 148, quoted in Trevor Ling, *The Buddha: Buddhist Civilization in India and Ceylon*, 1973, Pelican Books 1976, p. 168.

5. Trevor Ling, *A History of Religion East and West*, *op. cit.* p. 91.