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The Early Buddhist Perspective on the Relation between the Person and the Community

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	ABSTRACT
Keywords: <i>Budhha, Nikaya, Sutta, Precepts, Dhamma</i> 	This essay attempts to chart out the connection between the individual and the community in the light of the teachings of the Budhha. At a time when the world is torn asunder by hatred and sectarian violence, Buddhist philosophy which urges individuals to purge out vices from the mind that would eventually create a just and harmonious society. Individuals with the right view would go on to construct better, egalitarian societies whose rules, customs and rituals would benefit all. That is perhaps why, the focus is on building the right state of mind through prāgya, silā and samādhi. A compassionate mind having unlimited goodwill, devoid of defilements, drives one to act spontaneously with pure altruistic intention-expecting nothing for the self (no-self) in return for the favour done. This is what the world needs today and in the light of the present scenario, this article reiterates why one should go back to the Theravada perspective and apply the same in everyday practice.

Introduction

For more than 2600 years, Buddhism has enchanted thinkers and laity alike with its deep insights into the nature of our lived experience and for providing a general, easy and practical solution to the most fundamental, universal problems plaguing all of humanity since time immemorial. In this article, I analyse the early Buddhist (Theravada) perspective on the nature of the relation between the person and the community / institutions in the community.

In early Buddhism, one is encouraged to fulfil his worldly obligations. The Anguttara Nikāya along with the Sigālaka Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya are replete with Buddha's guidance on the householder's responsibilities towards his family members and the society at large. Lily DeSilva writes: "In the Anguttara Nikaya the Buddha describes, with sacrificial terminology, three types of fires that should be tended with care and honor.

They are *ahuneyyaggi*, *gahapataggi* and *dakkhineyyaggi*. The Buddha explained that *ahuneyyaggi* means one's parents, and they should be honored and cared for. *Gahapataggi* means one's wife and children, employees and dependents.

Dakkineyyaggi represents religious persons who have either attained the goal of arahantship or have embarked on a course of training for the elimination of negative mental traits. All these should be cared for and looked after as one would tend a sacrificial fire. According to the Mahamangala Sutta, offering hospitality to one's relatives is one of the great auspicious deeds a layperson can perform." (2010)

Principles of right moral conduct, expressed in terms of moral duties or rules known as Precepts, are as much as codes of conduct for psychological development as they are foundations of creating a just and harmonious society. Several such sets of precepts (e.g., *pañcaśīla*, *aṣṭāṅga-śīla* and *daśa-śīla*) are mentioned in the Sutras for both the laity and the monks. These are to be followed because any virtuous person, who has successfully counteracted negative dispositions called *kleśas* or vices (and has therefore prepared himself for Nirvana) would internalize them as beliefs and apply them naturally and spontaneously through their conduct with others and the environment. The Sonadanda Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya too emphasizes the complimentary, reinforcing nature of personal wisdom-a private pursuit on one hand and morality- our duty to others in the community, on the other: "Ethics and wisdom always go together. An ethical person is wise, and a wise person ethical. And ethics and wisdom are said to be the best things in the world. It's just like when you clean one hand with the other, or clean one foot with the other." (Bhikku Sujato trans. 2018)

Even when the Buddha advises public administrators on how to govern, the focus is not on how they should control their subjects into submission. The emphasis rather is on personal conduct and thought. Kuddakanikāya and Jātaka tales specify ten duties (Dasavidharājadhamma) that Kings/administrators should follow: charity, morality, altruism, honesty, gentleness, self-control; non-anger, non-violence, forbearance, and uprightness (*danam silam pariccagam, ajjavam maddavam tapam; akkodham avihiṃsanca, khantīna avirodhanam*). Thus, the path to social welfare starts with each person's psychological purification. A Nibbana seeker is supposed to cultivate four sublime states, namely compassion (Karunā), goodwill (mettā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā) in meditation in order to cleanse the mind of the defilements (kleshas-rāga, dvesa and moha).

It is understandable why the Buddha placed greater emphasis on cultivating unlimited goodwill before actual performance of an act of compassion. An act of love or compassion may be a form of asserting power or control over the other. It may be a medium or strategy for imposing an ideology or culture on the beneficiary. An act of altruism may be backed by a bad intention following from mental defilements or it may be a product of a duty borne out of one's commitment or duty towards the particular community to which he is affiliated. Wrong intention for helping others would be for instance, the desire for fame or protection or favour or good image in society. It may even follow from a false sense of belongingness (mine) to a particular community. For example, you might feel obliged to help X (but not Y) because X belongs to your community (not Y).

For true acts of altruism, one has to propagate the Dhamma to individual persons. This is the greatest form of altruism, for it is these reformed individuals with the right view who would go on to construct better, egalitarian societies whose rules, customs and rituals would benefit all. That is perhaps why, the focus is on building the right state of mind through *prāgya*, *silā* and *samādhi*. A compassionate mind having unlimited goodwill, purged of defilements, drives one to act spontaneously with pure altruistic intention-expecting nothing for the self (no-self) in return for the favour done.

Did the Buddha advocate social and political activism?

Some later Buddhists and even some contemporary followers advocate the reverse approach. They emphasize the significance of social involvement for moral upliftment. Socially engaged Buddhists think that practicing Buddhism necessarily involves social and political activism. Patricia Hunt-Perry and Lyn Fine ascribe the following quote to Thich Nhat Hanh, the originator of the Engaged Buddhism movement: “Buddhism is already engaged Buddhism. If it is not, it is not Buddhism.” (2000, 35-36) That is, to participate actively involved in social and political affairs and work for systemic change is a moral obligation for the Buddhist.

Note however that, in the textual evidence cited above, the recommended altruism/social responsibility is directed from persons to persons. On the contrary, there are several recorded instances wherein the Buddha refused to be drawn into social or political disputes involving communities or ideologies. For example, he was initially reluctant in admitting women into the Sangha. He agreed only after laying down eight rules (*garudhammas*) for Bhikkuni ordination, in addition to the 227 rules of monastic discipline, the Vinaya which all Bhikkhus have to follow. Another restriction imposed on female followers is that married women had to seek the permission of both the parents and the husbands for ordination but no such restriction was formulated for married men. Thus, it is clear that he did not challenge or plan to overthrow the existing social order.

One should not apply binary thinking here and construe from his silence on community issues that he tacitly approved of discriminatory social practices. That he did not is clear from the way he constituted and run his monastic order, whose administration was based on democratic principles and which did not discriminate amongst its inhabitants based on their birth. Casteism was prevalent and democracy was absent in the community, outside the Sangha and yet the Buddha chose to tread a different path within the monastic order. Why then did he follow the patriarchy and imposed restrictions on his female followers who wished to join as bhikkhunis? What explains the difference in approach?

I think a possible explanation is that dissatisfaction against the all-pervading authority of the Vedas and its ritual-centric ethics was already simmering in the society by the time the Buddha started propagating his dhamma. Thus, he could reject casteism while formulating monastic rules without inviting violent backlashes from the monarchy or the general public. In contrast, patriarchy was deep-rooted in the society and challenging it with radical moves might have invited the wrath of the powers-that-be. Violent obstruction could have harmed all his disciples and slowed down the propagation of the Dhamma. That is probably why he imposed additional restrictions on the ordination of women. These restrictions were deliberately not strong enough to deter the motivated; they were just enough to steer clear of

trouble. The purportedly first-hand accounts of bhikkhunis in the Therigatha prove that the women within the Sangha were far better treated than they were outside and they felt emancipated. Thus, the restrictive rules were effective more in letter than in spirit. Amod Lele gives several examples from classical Indian Buddhist texts to show that early Buddhism discouraged active participation in political and social affairs:

“The *Rajja Sutta* (SN I.116-117) goes yet further. Here, even to rule according to dharma (*dhammena*) is presented to the Buddha as a *temptation from Māra*, the evil tempter figure. As the Buddha comes closer to awakening, he wonders: “Is it possible to exercise rulership righteously [*dhammena*]: without killing and without instigating others to kill, without confiscating and without instigating others to confiscate, without sorrowing and without causing sorrow?” Māra replies that he can and should indeed rule righteously. But the Buddha, of course, refuses this temptation, and proceeds instead on the monastic path.” (2019, 256-257)

“In the *Gilāna Sutta* (SN IV.302-304), the highly regarded householder disciple Citta is sick and about to die, and the gods ask him to vow that he will become a cakravartin. But he turns them down, saying: “That too is impermanent; that too is unstable; one must abandon that too and pass on.” Citta is not a bodhisattva or aspiring to be a buddha; he is simply aiming at arhatship, the lower kind of awakening possible for a normal person. But even that is a greater goal than being a ruler who will bring general prosperity and flourishing to his society.”¹

The Buddha’s silence is even more striking in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta* where King Ajātasattu’s minister, requested him for his opinion on the king’s plan to invade and wipe out the Vajjis. In response, the Buddha only specified seven factors (*satta aparihāniyā dhamma*) which, if followed, would ensure growth and prevent decline of the community of the Vajjis. But he did not condemn Ajātasattu’s decision to indulge in violence and destruction. This stuck as odd to some scholars (e.g., Damien Keown 2020) because in such situations, one would expect the Buddha to vehemently discourage all violent political actions as they undermine the dignity of the person.

What could be the reason for such accounts of political disengagement in early Buddhist texts? The *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta* provides the clue. It begins and ends with the following passage:

“Monks, be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves with no other refuge. Let the Dhamma be your island, let the Dhamma be your refuge, with no other refuge. . . Keep to your own preserves, monks, to your ancestral haunts. If you do so, then Māra will find no lodgement, no foothold. It is just by the building-up of wholesome states that this merit increases².

In between, the sutta describes a story of how a once flourishing kingdom spiralled into moral, economic and decline and the lives of its citizens got worse over time once the king failed to help the needy. At some point, a desperate group of people reach the conclusion: “It

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Dīgha Nikāya*. III.58. Pali Text Society edition. Translation: Walshe.

is only because we became addicted to evil ways that we suffered this loss of our kindred, so let us now do good! What good things can we do? Let us abstain from the taking of life – that will be a good practice”.³ This moral action improves their lives and feeling encouraged, they undertake other moral activities as well. As a result, gradually, order would return to the community and ultimately, a new Cakravartin will arise, as will the future buddha Metteyya (Maitreya). In the final lines, the story returns to the present where the Buddha affirms the premise that was stated in the beginning: “Monks, be islands unto yourselves....”

Understanding Buddha’s apparent aversion to social activism

Rejecting objections of inconsistency, Lele and Stevens Collins have rightly noted that the embedded story actually complements the advice to the monks in the beginning and end of the sutra. Lele argues: “good and bad social systems will come and go, and they will get worse before they get better. So, the narrative provides a reason why the text’s audience should build personal virtue and embrace the dharma, *rather than* placing its hope in those social systems or any idea of progress therein...moral improvement is what ultimately makes the material conditions better. To do so, the text says, audience members can and should disengage from society. Then they will no longer be dependent on social conditions for their well-being.”⁴

I think the above explanation is correct but it requires elaboration. We may consider all social and political systems as analogous to the games we play⁵. For your actions to be counted as moves within a game of play, you need to follow its constituting rules. These rules may not be perfect but their validity has to be presupposed if you aspire to be a good player. You can sincerely assess the validity of the rules only from a distance-when you are not playing the game. Similarly, any community or institution functions according to some fundamental, constituting rules and beliefs decided by a group of individuals who matter in that community. Any social or political action you do or any idea you propose, which is intended at servicing this community inevitably makes you implicitly, by default, the supporter of the fundamental, constituting beliefs of that institution or community; you will be publicly seen as a defender of those underlying rules, norms and beliefs even if you explicitly deny so. The problem with such a state of affairs is- Since these institutions are not global and material resources are limited, any act which promotes the stability and welfare of the community might lead to suffering of individuals, within or outside these institutions.

For example, the duty of an army man is to serve his nation during its war even if that means inflicting suffering on citizens of the enemy country. Similarly, a human resource official, is duty-bound to transfer an employee to a far-off place in the interest of the company even if that means inflicting suffering on the family of the transferee employee. The obligation to fulfil their respective duties comes from their implicit commitment to essential principles governing the material welfare of their respective institutions. They are justified in their actions if considered from within those institutions. But from a neutral/global perspective, it is plainly wrong to indulge in such activities as they exacerbate the suffering of individual persons. Lele remarks: “the text (*Aggañña Sutta*)

³ *Dīgha Nikāya*. III.73. Pali Text Society edition. Translation: Walshe.

⁴ Op.cit. Lele. p-264.

⁵ I have borrowed the games analogy from the famous philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

explicitly proclaims that accusation, punishment, and banishment are *bad* (*pāpaka, akusala*), just as the original thefts are. Their role in maintaining society does not stop them from creating bad karma and interfering with one's progress to nirvana. Likewise, in the *Mūgapakkha Jātaka*, the Bodhisatta (buddha-to be) is born as a prince whose father rules according to dharma (*dhammena*). Yet even so, when the Bodhisatta sees his father punishing criminals, he thinks: "Ah! my father *through his being a king*, is becoming guilty of a grievous action which brings men to hell"⁶

This explains why the Buddha could have chosen to become a Chakkavatin king and attempted to eradicate suffering using all his state given powers but he chose to be a wandering mendicant instead; Acting according to the Rajdharma would have obligated him to undertake acts which are against the Dhamma.

Directly attempting to reform the community without reforming the individuals within it might lead to rejecting the fundamental community-beliefs only to be replaced by a new set of community beliefs which are fundamental to the newly-formed community. But some of these new beliefs could again be against the Dhamma because they might not be conducive to the welfare of *all* beings in the cosmos. So, it makes sense to reform the individual first, irrespective of his affiliations. That is why, the Buddha neither advised Ajātasattu against invasion nor did he protest against the prevalent patriarchy in the then society. It would not only be futile but the disfavour from the powers-that-be that it might bring to the Sangha would have impeded the spread of the Dhamma which is the vehicle through which real welfare for all beings can be achieved.

Conclusion

In this journey of emancipation, the person has to first purge the defilements of his mind which have arisen due to lack of knowledge about the true nature of reality. Through right conduct, right concentration on his subconscious psychological activity and wisdom, he can build a character and dispositions that are conducive to attaining Nibbana. The conditionality of all phenomena makes it imperative for the right view and character to entail a cosmopolitan, egalitarian and compassionate attitude towards all beings.

Early Buddhism doesn't prescribe rules for the conduct of local communities or institutions because every local community is based on some constitutive rules which are based on local concerns. Thus, they fail to incorporate the possibility of welfare for all beings which is the essence of the Dhamma. For this reason, the Buddha refrains from supporting any one form of ideology or institution. Rather, once the ruler or a group of persons develops a virtuous character according to the Dhamma, they are in a position to formulate rules for the community which are conducive to the welfare of all and also satisfies the situational needs of its members.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp-265-256.

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