

BUDDHISM AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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Buddhism was founded by Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha, in India in the sixth century B.C. The Buddha did not intend to found a new religion but he did point out the many injustices which prevailed and afflicted the society of his day, many of them which were done in the name of religion. One such injustice was the caste system which placed every human being in a fixed social order and was determined by birth. This caused Indian human society to be divided, unfairly into high and low stations. One consequence of this was that often those born into a low caste were from the moment they were born denied basic human rights, human justice and human dignity. Women and members of the lower castes were also deprived of an education and denied the chance to develop themselves spiritually. And many people indulged in ritual sacrifice which involved the killing of animals in the name of a god. In those days too, people of all castes used to spend a great deal of money and time in the name of religion in the hope that their efforts and expense would earn them salvation after death. People also used to dress in a special way, use ornaments and decorate their bodies in a prescribed way to demonstrate their affiliation and loyalty to a particular religion. These practises very often led them to think that they were pious and very highly developed spiritual people.

The Buddha's teaching, however went against many of the current beliefs of the day and sought to expose these injustices and the superficiality underlying many religious customs. What the Buddha taught was the *Dhamma*. Dhamma means among other things "just", it is righteousness. To strive for righteousness in one's life depends on one's being moral. Morality itself, depends on mind and volition. Whether one is moral or immoral depends on the purity or impurity of his or her mind. Buddhism, therefore is not a religion in the sense the word 'religion' is most commonly understood. But, it is the path of purification of the mind.

According to the Buddha morality is not only the foundation of our spiritual path but the axis upon which the whole of our spiritual development revolves and depends. Buddhism encourages people to develop their minds. External shows of piety and the use of religious objects are not what is important. What is important is that we develop our minds and purify them through the practice of morality, concentration and wisdom.

*"No water from any great river can purify,
or wash away the impurities of the mind".
"But only the water of morality can wash
away the stains in living beings". (Visuddhimagga)*

The Buddha emphasized morality or Sila as being the first step we need to take on the path to purification. The goal of our spiritual development aims at the attainment of Liberation. Liberation in Buddhism means freedom from bondages, such as greed, hatred and delusion. So it is that without moral development there can be no Liberation.

Right Livelihood figures prominently in the Buddha's moral teaching. Right Livelihood, traditionally, entails not dealing in arms and lethal weapons, animals for slaughter, human beings, intoxicating drinks, and poison. Though the Buddha mentioned only these five things, there are many other wrong ways of earning a living. We understand that the Buddha was addressing Indian society in the sixth century B.C. which consisted for the most part of farmers, herdsmen and traders. Poverty, in fact, is the main cause of crime. If people are deprived of the bare necessities, such as cloth, food, a lodging and medicine, they cannot and do not think of moral behaviour, or give a thought to righteous living. Owing to lack of economic security, and of money, people are led to commit theft and other crimes. The precept about Right Livelihood was designed to bring true happiness to the individual and society and to promote unity and proper relations among people.

The Buddha states in the Kutadanta Sutta, how in order to raise the social and economic conditions of a country, the farmers and traders should be given the necessary facilities to carry on their farming and business, and that the people should be paid adequate wages. Thus when they have enough for their subsistence and are economically secure, crime is lessened and peace and harmony prevail. (Dighanikaya) In another discourse the Buddha explains to Anathapaindika, the banker, the four kinds of happiness a layman ought to enjoy. The first is ownership or economic security, so that he has sufficient means acquired lawfully by his own effort; the second is the joy of wealth or happiness gained by the judicious expenditure of lawful wealth; the third is the bliss of not being in debt, the joy and satisfaction that comes with the thought: "I owe nothing to anyone": the fourth is the bliss of being without blame, which is the satisfaction derived from the thought; "I am blessed with blameless acts of body, speech and mind. (Anguttara Nikaya - ii 69)

Here the word livelihood implies not only a pure means of earning one's living but it also means we have to be morally responsible towards all of society. If we do not take any responsibility for society then our minds are easily overwhelmed by self-interest and we become selfish and uncaring. If the mind is not pure then we cannot behave in a moral or just and righteous way in our day to day dealings with other people. Moreover, when our mind is dominated by greed then morality is lacking and our spiritual development is arrested, The Buddha never expected us to

worship him blindly but he wanted us to be pure in mind and just in deed . For these reasons we regard the Buddha as a great teacher but not as a saviour of mankind. He was a guide and his Dhamma is a light to guide us on our spiritual path. The Buddha himself said again and again that the Dhamma, his teaching was to be used as a raft to ferry one across the river of samsara and suffering to the further shore of Nibbana. He meant for his teaching in all its parts to show people to help themselves and so successfully cross over from the mundane to the supramundane state.

If we study the Buddha's teachings of Morality, concentration and Wisdom we will come to realize how we, ourselves, are responsible for our own liberation or purification of the mind. If we also investigate the Buddha's teachings on the Sublime States: i.e. Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity towards living beings, then we will come to realize that we, ourselves, are responsible for our own well-being and that of society as well. Just as we want to enjoy prosperity and happiness in this life and the next, so we want the same for all living beings. This planet is our home and each of us has the right to live here as do all other beings, animals, trees, plants and every other kind of living organism. This is to say that the development of animate and inanimate things in this world are interconnected and interdependent, so that worldly and spiritual growth is dependent upon everyone and everything else in this world. Nothing exists or can develop independently.

According to Buddhism whatever injustices, abuses and crimes occur in society are not only the product of poverty or economic decline but they are also conditioned by our own mind. The Buddha said all suffering in this world had three causes: human greed, human anger, and human delusion. These three things are the real root causes of all injustices. This being the case the whole of the Buddha's teaching is directed towards the uprooting and eradication of these three harmful mental defilements. If our minds are free from all these three mental defilements, then we are liberated and we can experience the bliss of Nibbana here and now, in this very life.

In conclusion I would like to say further that the teachings of the Buddha did not encourage us to engage only in religious rites and rituals but encouraged us to develop ethical and moral principles and to act on them in our daily lives. For without such ethical and moral principles there can be no Liberation, no happiness , no peace or no harmony among men.

May All Beings Be Happy!