

COMMITTEE II
The Value of Human Life

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Discussant Paper on Sulak Sivaraksa's Paper

THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT

by

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A RESPONSE TO ' THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT' .

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It is interesting and noteworthy that we find clearer and clearer in Buddhist world today some intellectual and moral movements side by side with the so-called modernistic culture. The movements characterize in such ways of 'spiritual-matched-secular' implication, explanation, application and implementation.

With their immense effort and very sound success in 'practising Buddhist principles on which, in Buddhist advocates' conviction, are founded all human good affairs, social, political, economic, educational, etc. And certainly and obviously, they mainly emphasize on axiological problem of humanity and the value of human life.

In some Buddhist countries such as in Thailand (former Siam), for instance, the Buddhist research-works and textbooks titled likely 'The Principles of Buddhist Economics, Politics, Medical science, Education', and the like are initiated and introduced to schools, colleges, and universities. Young people are educated, encouraged and enlightened to their own hereditary values, virtues and ways of life and thinking little by little, while still becoming the victims of the materialistic values as Professor Sulak Sivaraksa expresses in his paper 'Western consumer culture', in believing that 'the more one's desires are met, the happier one supposes to become', and that 'value of human life can be measured and counted quantitatively in terms of material belongings possessed'.

So far as my knowledge goes, Professor Sivalaksa is indeed recognized as one of Thai humanistic thinkers with their open-critical minds who cannot stand for unjust social system and social evils of any kind, while working out energetically and effectively for the enlightening of Neo-Buddhists to realize their own hereditary values and ways of life.

The present paper he contributes to our Conference gives us an almost whole insight into 'the value of human life in Buddhist tradition', in his style of Buddhist interpretation of social philosophy. Many standpoints of Buddhist humanism, pragmatism, realism, empiricism and even secularism are clarified and emphasized, while those of metaphysical aspects of humanity are ignored. This is very well understood in Buddhist way of thinking that metaphysical argument as such brings about nothing useful to man but 'intellectual illusion'.

Anyhow, the author is expected to supplement and not to avoid from discussion on essential principles of philosophical questions relevantly relating to man and humanity which help us to grasp a Buddhist insight into the value of human life. These principal questions to be fairly concerned for understanding of human life and value can be illuminated in three points: What is man ? Why is man ? and How is man ? In this paper we find that the author presents to us the knowledge of 'how man is' or on the ways of conduct to be performed and practised here and now after life being existed for the good, welfare and well-being of social humanity (pages 1-4), though man's position and four signs are psychologically characterized without making explicit how this understanding of life would relate to three natural or universal signs of impermanence, suffering, and non-self. Then in the rest of paper his arguments become more and more relevant to socio-economic and political ethics and criticism.

Human personality, according to the Buddhist thought, is a combination of the natural and cultural elements; a composite of spiritio-psychical and physical components (nāmarūpa) and its very nature is changing and impermanent. Life starts from conceptuality and in relation to it the presupposition of 'I' and 'mine' arises¹. Yet it is
1.Cp.Dīgha Nikāya I, p.76, III.p.212, and Sangyutta Nikāya IV.p.83

neither 'some by-product of merely material elements' nor 'the divine creation of God.' Its value cannot be traced to the two principles, namely, the materialistic and the theistic, but is conditioned by the practice, through human creativity and effort, of the three cultural principles of advanced morality (adhisilasikkhā), concentration (adhicittasikkhā), and insight or wisdom (adhipaññāsikkhā)?²

Man possesses a free will and effort in the field of threefold action: in thought, speech, and deed. The glory of human life, individual as well as social, lies in this element, but it is also the source of difficulties and sometimes of degradation of mankind and dehumanization.³ Man has human value in the individual who acts in a worthy way for his own welfare and for that of others. Everyone expressing himself through body-with-mind is a chooser; he has the choice between free play of will and restraint of will by regulation. He acts what he believes to be better and it is of his nature to seek freely, through many 'betters', a 'best'. He is aware of an inner motivation to act or not to act, he lives with others in equal status of same humanity; each is a willer, each is a chooser, existing according to his own choice--- a choice for the improvement of humanity.

Man's position and value is supreme; he is his own master judging over his destiny; his success or failure lies in his own will, choice and strength. " Since nothing is dearer to man than his own life", says The Buddha, " man should regard and respect the lives of others as he does his own."⁴ Human life or more properly human conditions are of supreme value, not only because of life itself but also because of the fact that human welfare, -material, moral and spiritual-, and even final emancipation or the state of Nibbāna are gained from it and in it.⁵

2. Dīgha Nikāya I, p.18, 76; Majjhima Nikāya I, p.327

3. Cp. for instance Dīgha Nikāya III, p.68ff.

4. Saṅguyutta Nikāya I, p.75

5. CDH.III, p.235

Man is what he is and acts due to what he can make of himself by the exercise of his own dignity, will, effort and potentiality latent in man whose totality of value has nothing to do with the presupposed illusion of caste, class and complexion. The Buddha asserts that man by nature and culture possesses an element of initial effort (*ārabhadhātu*), human actualization (*puṇṣakāro*), personal own actualization (*attakāro*), and that there are in man the elements of exertion (*nikkamadhātu*), of endeavour (*parakkamadhātu*), of strength (*thāmadhātu*), of perseverance (*thitidhātu*) and of enterprise and self-reliance (*upakkamadhātu*) which all make him act of his own accord in various ways and for the perfection of his human value.⁶ "By oneself alone one is defiled or purified, and no one can purify another", The Buddha states, "purity and impurity depend on oneself".⁷

In Buddhist thought, the ideal man is one who has oneself trained and achieved the perfection of wisdom justified by good, perfect conduct. (*vijjācaranasampanno*), and who lives for the good, welfare and well-being of oneself together with others.⁸ Buddhism affirms not eternal soul or permanent selfhood but a continuity and relativity of human personality the value of which should be accepted primarily in the life-existence itself and then with gradually acquired qualities. The process of ethical concern with human personality is such that the avoidance of evil and cultivation of good along with the purification of mind makes man and his life better and happier. There is an assertion of a state or the final

6. Majjhima Nikāya I, p.21, Anguttara Nikāya III, p.337 ff.

7. CDH.III, p.148

8. Dīgha Nikāya III, p.233, Anguttara Nikāya II, p.95

goal with the means of attaining it--the state of perfection, extinction of suffering, ultimate freedom and bliss to be attained only when man's mind is absolutely pure and cleansed of all defilements of greed, hatred and illusion by the possibility of human free will, effort and potentiality. Man and man alone is pointed as the creator of his own life and sole designer of his own destiny. No variety and diversity is accepted in humanity.^{9.}

As specialists we tend to see life in mechanistic fragments and to lose a human sense of its unity, meaning and wholesomeness. Considerably and ultimately speaking, this dehumanization as we have observed in our long human experience is due to the imbalancedness in the development of secularity and spirituality in human life. Awareness of social facts must be supplemented and directed by in awareness of human value. What development and progress imply in real purpose and context ~~life~~ in our conscient experience of the totality of a better, higher qualified living which cannot be measured and justified primarily and finally by material things or products of scientific and technological inventions through education of 'dominion'. The conquest of the nature does not necessarily mean for either moral improvement or greater happiness, or higher humanity. In Buddhist sense, progress has to do principally with the achievement of human value, dignity, nobility and honourability; it is a development of those qualities that are distinctively humane, for the establishment of a better life, society and world here on this earth.¹⁰

9. See in detailed explanation in Siddhi Butr-Indr: Social Philosophy of Buddhism, p.37-59

10.Cp.Siddhi Butr-Indr: The Philosophy of Humanism, p.271-299.