

**THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT**

by

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From a Buddhist viewpoint, man is a unique being. Superior beings such as gods or angels have a much easier life than man, but are so endowed with happiness that they do not realize that hatred, greed and delusion still operate over them. Hence it is not possible for them to exercise their spiritual strength to the degree that they could be liberated from their mode of existence. Similarly, sub-human beings such as elephants can think very much like man, and can develop such qualitative values as honesty, sincerity and gratitude. But, they can never overcome anger, lust or ignorance. Buddhists believe that man, alone, has the potential to achieve the highest quality in life; the ultimate end of the life-cycle or, in other words, liberation from suffering. All beings can contribute to lessening their own suffering as well as the suffering of others. Only man, however, has the ability not only to lessen suffering, but also to eliminate the root causes of suffering altogether. It is therefore man's duty, both to himself and to all other beings, to take the path towards overcoming all suffering, and this path is shown to us by the Buddha.

The Buddhist attitude towards life can be characterized by the Four Signs. i.e. an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man (wandering monk). It is said that upon perceiving these signs, Prince Siddharta realized that the path towards overcoming suffering and death required a life of spiritual purity. Hence he left the luxurious life of the palace to seek salvation, and eventually found Enlightenment. Thus he became Buddha - the Awakened One.

For those of us who follow the Buddha's teachings, we should aim to cultivate the right view towards life and death, even though we may not reach the state of deathlessness. Unless we have reached a certain level of understanding, we tend to resist becoming old, sick, or lifeless. We do not wish to be departed from those who are dear to us; nor to confront with those who we detest. Indeed, for many of us it is good to have pleasurable feelings and to resist all that is suffering or unsatisfactory. From the Buddhist standpoint, however, this is not natural. According to the Buddha, there are five facts which everyone of us should contemplate again and again:

- (1) I am subject to decay, and I cannot escape it.
- (2) I am subject to disease, and I cannot escape it.
- (3) I am subject to death, and I cannot escape it.
- (4) There will be separation from all that are dear and beloved to me.
- (5) I am the owner of my deeds. Whatever deed I do, whether good or bad, I shall become heir to it.

Death is the natural outcome of birth; and birth is also the consequence of death. This is the cycle of life from which only those who have reached the state of deathlessness or Enlightenment can escape. Those of us still drawn within this cycle should therefore train ourselves to realize that death is a certainty. It is only uncertain as to when we will die; and whether we will have a relatively short life or a relatively long life. Hence we should be mindful not to make waste of our life. Whatever is right and proper, we should perform

while we can, so that our life is valuable and wholesome. To be beneficial to ourselves and others makes our life meaningful. At the same time, we should not be afraid of death; nor be saddened by the death of those dear to us. In fact, practising Buddhists should think of death as a good reminder of the value of leading a life which is useful to fellow human and other beings, as well as to the whole natural environment.

So, the more we understand about death, the more we understand our own life. When we think about it, we realize that our whole life-span is actually very short; comparable to the life-span of a thought which disappears as soon as another thought arises. This does not mean that we should not take life seriously. On the contrary, the Buddha reminds us to take death as a condition to help us conduct our lives diligently, mindfully, meaningfully and usefully; both for our own welfare and for the welfare of others. In actual fact, our daily lives are also conditioned by many other factors. If we are not mindful, our lives become conditioned by greed, lust, fame, riches, power, hatred, fear, indecisiveness, and delusion. Sometimes we cause much harm to ourselves and to others by deeds supposedly carried out in the name of our honour, religion, or nation; or for the sake of our children.

Ordinary weaklings on the whole lead a life of laziness, or just 'enjoy' themselves as their sensual feelings would guide them. They avoid thoughts about death or undesirable outcomes. Conditioned by fear, by fame, or the like; they work so hard to achieve 'success' or to be 'secure'. In other words, they do not lead their lives mindfully.

For those of us who wish to lead meaningful lives, we should be conditioned by righteousness (Dharma). In dealing with life we must have confidence; and in dealing with others, compassion and wisdom. Thinking of death mindfully leads to confidence in life; and to the realization that while we live we must not be conditioned by hatred, greed, or delusion. In fact our every thought, word and deed should be designed to overcome these three root causes of suffering.

Once we train ourselves to have a natural attitude towards death, we also achieve an understanding of life and its consequences. We realize that there is nothing unusual in the fact that we shall depart from our beloved; that we shall have union with those whom we dislike; or that we shall not achieve many things that we would like to achieve. We also develop a realistic attitude towards the chaos and multitude of suffering in the world around us. But possessing this understanding is by no means sufficient. We must also know how to actively deal with our situation. We must take the right path to overcome suffering.

Many Buddhists feel that it is sufficient to adjust one's inner self to be calm and to be aware of the archaic conditions of the

external world. Although one may be deprived of certain rights and physical comforts, yet one should remain calm and content. Death will obviously come and the world may even be destroyed by a nuclear holocaust, yet one should remain in a state of equanimity. This is in fact a wrong view. It is a path of pure heedlessness, rooted in ignorance and delusion. To take the right path, we should certainly be calm; but we must also try to understand the cause of death and destruction, and how to overcome them meaningfully.

In Buddhism, the key word for the affirmation of wholeness of life is "to walk on". When one is a weakling, one is afraid of death and suffering and cannot "walk on". Once one understands the Dharma, then one can adjust one's inner condition to have a detached view of the world; having less greed, hatred and delusion. One is fairly content. Yet the external world remains unjust and dangerous. A small group of rich and powerful people still ruthlessly exploit the natural environment. The majority of people are deprived of basic human rights. Starvation, malnutrition, unemployment, prostitution, robbery and drug addiction are still prevalent. According to the Buddha, to ignore such a situation is to fall into a state of heedlessness; to be trapped by a false happiness. This is not considered as "walking on".

In other words, we should adjust our inner condition, which should be calm and mindful, to be aware of the unjust external world. It is wrong to try to adjust the external world without training one's mind to be neutral and selfless. It is also wrong to be calm and detached without a proper concern to bring about better social conditions for all who share our planet earth as well as those who live in the same universe. In life it is our duty to restructure our consciousness to deal with the human society selflessly and harmoniously; with loving kindness, compassion, wisdom, and sympathetic joy. The Buddha encourages us to live mindfully all the time; to be free from hatred, greed and delusion as driving forces within ourselves; to be calm and critical, both of ourselves and our common situation; and to work with our brothers and sisters to bring about what is right and just to our world.

In Buddhism, individual perfection and social good are interdependent. A society that is comprised of people who can depend economically and intellectually on themselves can be a relatively peaceful, stable and secure society. Such a society is ideally favourable to all efforts towards individual growth; physical, moral and spiritual. On the contrary, if a society is in turmoil, suffering from instability and insecurity, then it is difficult indeed to cultivate individual perfection. While there are some things in life which no one can do for others, and for which each individual is self-responsible; yet there are many things which everyone of us can do directly or indirectly for the benefit of others. Hence we should all take responsibility both for our own development and for the development of our common society; both of which are unseparably intertwined.

Traditional Buddhist Society was a society in which the population was highly self-reliant economically, culturally, ethically and intellectually. In the days of absolute monarchy, the rulers were expected to observe or possess sets of Buddhist virtues or qualities such as charity, high moral character, self-sacrifice, gentleness, non-indulgence, non-oppression, tolerance, and righteousness. Such rulers were expected to protect and care for all inhabitants of their kingdom, including beasts and birds. It was their duty to prevent and suppress unrighteous deeds, to see to the distribution of wealth among the poor, and to promote agriculture and other vocations. The strength of a monarch was considered to lie mainly in his wisdom in dealing with the affairs of his kingdom.

What is specially noteworthy about these virtues and royal duties was the emphasis on overcoming poverty. Poverty was regarded as the negation to the wholeness of life; and as the main source of crime and disorder. Economic self-sufficiency was considered a prerequisite for a happy, secure and stable society, favourable to the development of individual perfection; and it was required of the ruler to see that this desirable state of affairs prevailed in his kingdom.

Quite a number of people have the mis-conception that Buddhism regards poverty as a desirable quality. In this respect, poverty is confused with contentment, fewness of wishes, or non-indulgence; which are qualities much admired, as long as they are accompanied by effort and diligence, not by passivity or idleness. Poverty as such is in no way praised or encouraged by the Buddha. On the contrary, possession of wealth by a king or an average householder can be praiseworthy; and even for a monk to receive frequent offerings (though monks are not expected to seek wealth) can be considered a virtue.

What is considered important in Buddhism is how wealth is gained and how it is made use of. It is considered evil to earn wealth in a dishonest or unlawful way. It is also completely wrong to become enslaved through clinging and attachment to wealth, thereby incurring suffering because of it. Equally blamable to the unlawful earning of wealth is to accumulate riches through stinginess; not spending such riches for the well-being of oneself, one's dependents, and other people. Again, it is also evil if one squanders wealth foolishly, indulgently, or uses it to cause suffering to others.

A good and praiseworthy Buddhist layman seeks wealth rightfully, and uses it for the good and happiness of himself and others. He devotes much or most of his wealth to support the Sangha (community of monks), and to alleviate the suffering and poverty of others. He also enjoys spiritual freedom - not being attached to, infatuated with, or enslaved by his wealth. This is where the mundane and the trans-mundane join together.

To be mundane, one seeks wealth lawfully and unarbitrarily, then makes oneself happy, does meritorious deeds, and shares one's wealth with others. Yet a Buddhist ought to 'walk on' beyond this stage, to be transmundane. This means he should use his wealth without greed, longing, and infatuation. He should be heedful of the dangers of possessing wealth, and have an insight which allows him spiritual freedom. Such a person is one who has made much progress towards individual perfection, thus affirming the wholeness of life through the unity of the mundane and the transmundane; just as birth and death complement one another to complete the integral cycle of life.

In an ideal Buddhist society, under righteous and effective administration, there would be an absence of poverty. Everyone would enjoy economic self-reliance and self-sufficiency, except for the community of monks who would be purposely sustained by the surplus material supply of the lay society; in order that the lay people could be guided by the monks' life-style and spiritual progress over life and death. In the old days such an ideal Buddhist society might not have fully existed anywhere. Yet there were righteous rulers (Dhamma Raja) who tried to adhere to Buddhist virtues and qualities, though with shortcomings and imperfections; and their citizens did have a yardstick by which to measure their successes and failures.

Among the ordinary citizens there were also sets of virtues and guidelines to be observed. It was, for example, considered worthy to be wise, honest, moral, generous, tolerant, and confident. It was important to be energetic and industrious, skillful in management, to be watchful, to live in a good environment, to associate with good people, to have a balanced livelihood, and to aspire and direct oneself in the right way. On the social side, the individual was expected to maintain good relationships with other people and to make his contribution to the maintenance of a happy and favourable society by practising such virtues as giving and distributing, using kind and beneficial words, rendering useful services, and adhering to the principles of equality and impartiality.

Since the days of colonialism, Buddhist kingdoms have been replaced first by imperial rule, then by military dictatorship or a nominal form of western democracy. Most of the traditional Buddhist values and virtues have disappeared; replaced by western social norms and etiquettes, and ethical codes for the well-being of the Empire, the local elite, or the 'Company'. The local people do not really know how to make use of such western values for their personal well-being, or for the welfare of their own society, since they have been taught to look down upon their indigenous cultures, religions, and traditions.

Although Siam was never fully colonized in a political sense; intellectually, she has never regained independence since imperialism

made its mark. This is in fact the worst form of subjugation; to ape after western education, civilization and culture without a proper understanding of their implications. Blind admiration for western science and technology as if it were value free is indeed the worst crime. Coupled with the loss of self respect and critical awareness of one's own spiritual and cultural heritage, this leaves most Asian elite of the once - Buddhist lands in a spiritual crisis. On the one hand, they think they are Buddhists. Yet the Buddhism they adhere to is mostly just form and ritual (often outdated).

When the essence of Buddhist teaching is not properly understood, or purposely misinterpreted, a lot of harm can actually be carried out in its name. For instance, in Siam the usual cliché's about the Buddhist religion, the monarchy, and the Thai Nation are made use of to maintain the status quo; to help the rich get richer and the poor to remain poor- or even get poorer. Those who are suffering from poverty are told to be complacent about their situation, as this is the inevitable result of bad deeds performed in their previous lives. The Buddhist monkhood is even used to legitimize the military, who are the main forces of oppression, and who act as agents of the super powers and Transnational Corporations (TNC's) for exploitation of our natural resources.

So, Buddhist society has become the victim of colonialist, neo-colonialist and capitalist forces. Western consumer culture and technology have become dominant, and are being used ( especially through the mass media) to create new values opposite to Buddhist virtues; greed, hatred and violence are now encouraged. Ill-gotten wealth and power are to be admired. Lust and indulgence are seen as the affirmation of life; while death must be avoided at all costs even if this requires the use of highly expensive life-prolonging machines available only to the rich. So, life itself has now been given a price-tag, and the poor are discouraged from giving birth through 'family-planning' programmes.

'Family-planning', in fact, serves as a good illustration of the contrast between the Buddhist and consumer-culture approaches to life. Advocates of family-planning programmes argue that such measures are necessary to ease poverty in "developing countries" due to population growth and limited natural resources. This sounds reasonable if one is ignorant of the fact that it is the 'less-developed' societies which have traditionally managed to maintain a better balance with nature; while the western capitalist powers have squandered a much larger proportion of the world's natural resources on an extravagant materialist life-style maintained through the exploitation of the Third World! Family-planning thus becomes a giant red-herring masking the real causes of poverty and suffering in the world. When practised in western societies themselves, family-planning becomes an instrument for 'sexual freedom'. It can be seen, therefore, that family-planning is in many ways completely tied-up with the over-indulgences of the powerful materialist societies of the world. In Buddhist

society, family-planning would have little significance, since Buddhism stresses the harmony of man with nature, and the conservative utilisation of natural resources.

Also, a Buddhist should use sexual expression with care and respect, not for serving sensual lust, but as an expression of love and commitment. From the Buddhist point of view, vital energies (sexual, respiratory, spiritual) should be conserved as much as possible for the realization of individual and social improvements; as strength of spirit very much depends on these sources of energy.

How then can the false and deceptive values created by present-day materialism in the name of 'economic development' be overcome? This is only possible if we go back to our spiritual roots and traditions. Those of us who are of Buddhist tradition must return to the essential teachings of the Buddha, which are universal and timeless, so that full human development once again becomes possible. Furthermore, we must also gain an in-depth understanding of the present realities of the world around us, and the causes of widespread suffering and injustices. It is not, however, right for us to hate our 'oppressors' which are in essence unjust political and economic power-structures dominated by the super-powers and the TNC's. Hating them would make us thirst for revenge; and even if it were possible for us to destroy them through violence, we ourselves would be destroyed by our own hatred and aggression.

To properly overcome such unjust and harmful systems, our internal condition must be calm and mindful. We should cultivate loving kindness and compassion to others - our 'enemies' as much as their victims. If possible we should help to enlighten those working in governments, bureaucracies, international banking, TNC's etc., to see that unjust economic systems and blind use of high technologies are as harmful to themselves as to others. Poisonous foods, dangerous medicines and arms races may give them much unethical wealth; but eventually they also will be the losers. Indeed, the wealthy and powerful people of the world are not at all happy. They are very insecure and afraid of death. Yet they cause so much death and suffering. Poverty and wretchedness increase everywhere, and eventually all life on our planet may be destroyed.

While trying to educate the rich and powerful, we must always communicate with the poor and oppressed. Indeed, if we must choose sides, we should be with the poor, at least in our culture and life-style. The more our livelihood is simple, the less natural resources will be exploited. The less we imitate the rich, the more will we be free from the harmful effects of consumer culture and high technology. If, together with the poor, we could become conscientised not to join the richman's club or any system of oppression, then that would be the first step away from 'economic development' and towards full human development, which is the real affirmation of wholeness of life.



In order to bring about a growing force of awareness throughout the world, it is important that we gain a good understanding of complex systems such as the TNC's, which have greed, hatred and delusion as their main driving forces. Hence we understand how human destruction at **Bhopal** or **Chernobyl** became possible. But that event, and other great tragedies such as those at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, must not make us feel revengeful or helpless. We have to be mindful at all times. Wisdom and compassion must be our main driving forces. If the top people and their middle echelons will not learn any lessons from their destruction, then we will build up awareness with as many people as possible so that economic, political, cultural and technological oppression of every form is widely understood and opposed.

Such mass destruction as occurred at Bhopal due to the aggressiveness of modern technology and the uncontrollable power of the TNC's should help to make more and more of us aware of our lofty heritage prior to the colonial period and the Industrial Revolution. Despite our ancestors' short-comings and savagery, they never had such destruction and disregard for life on so large a scale. On the contrary, their stress on self-reliance, social harmony rather than competition, and their discouragement of greed, hatred and delusion should serve as an example to us for meaningful reapplication in the present day context. Then, for Buddhists at least, we should go back to the teachings of the Buddha on life and death; so as to strive for a peaceful and just society where individual moral and spiritual growth is nourished, and where the wholeness of life is truly affirmed.

When Prince Siddharta saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a wandering monk, he was moved to seek salvation and eventually became the Buddha, the Awakened One. Similarly, such suffering as that brought about at **Bhopal** and **Chernobyl** should move many of us to think together and act together to overcome such death and destruction, so as to bring about the awakening of mankind as a truly free being, living in harmony with the universe.

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