

Buddhistic Social Philosophy

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Abstract

Review Article

Buddha stood for a secular society marked by spiritual democracy. His dynamic and humanistic approach had a positive impact on Indian society and had captured the minds of common masses. His social philosophy was rooted in the knowledge of 'Four Noble Truths' which constitutes 'Suffering' (*Dhukha*), 'Origin of suffering' (*Dhukha karana*), 'Cessation of suffering' (*Dukha nivarana*) and 'the path of cessation of suffering' (*Dukha nivarana marga*). Thus Buddha with his dialectical thinking had constructed a social philosophy based on the principle of equality and mutual respect.

Keywords: Philosophy, Society, Buddha, Spirituality, Buddhism.

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INTRODUCTION

The Buddhist revolt played an important role in bringing about radical changes in the social conditions prevalent in ancient Indian society. The early Buddhist school was known as *Hinayana* which means *Little vessel of salvation*. The followers of this school deemed the teachings of Buddha as a small vessel or boat which helps to cross the river of worldliness towards salvation which they called *Nirvana*. The later Buddhists had taken effort to popularize Buddhist doctrines all over the world and carried Buddha's Philosophical and religious views to common man. Thus was born the later school of Buddhism known as *Mahayana* or the *Great vessel of Salvation*. Eastern and Northern Buddhism belong to *Mahayana* school which was dominant in India. This school of Buddhism succeeded in contributing a religious frame work to Buddha's philosophy. The Mahayana school insisted on the attainment of *bodha* or Buddhahood not only for oneself but for all the beings too. Hence the idea of Bodhisattva is a symbol of selflessness. Bodhisattva is the Buddhist icon which prays for the opening of the world of salvation for all the creatures of the world before he attains it. Getting nirvana for oneself, leaving others behind, is against the Buddhist philosophy of non-ego or selflessness. Once again, the Vedic ideal of *Lokasangraha* or 'holding together of all mankind' expressed itself through the Buddhist thought.. "Greater, higher, nobler, then, than the attainment of Arhatship must be the attainment of Bodhisatship from a desire to serve all living creatures in the ages that will come [1]."

Buddhism thus proved itself to be the strongest advocate of both social and spiritual equality. Its philosophy that gave no significance to differences based on inequality became highly appealing to people the world over. Buddhism became a popular religion in many parts of the world. It's tenet of equality was broader than that of any other religion that it has been "very good at adapting to different cultures while guarding its own somewhat fluid borders by a critical tolerance of other traditions [2].

Buddhist ethics provides us the guidelines for keeping a fair social relationship among different members of society. The *Sigalovada Sutta*, the prose *Sutra* or chapter, which speaks about the personal as well as social duties of man in every-day life, accepted by both *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* schools of Buddhism. It dealt with Buddhist ethics through which Buddha himself had established his socio-ethical value system for the virtuous life and self purification of man in society. "Many of the ideas in the *Sigalovada Sutta* are only suitable to a state of society which we, in this anxious time of social struggle, have for ever left behind; but we can, at least, 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 [3]."

Buddha's social philosophy was rooted in the knowledge of 'Four Noble Truths' which constitutes 'Suffering' (*Dhukha*), 'Origin of suffering' (*Dhukha karana*), 'Cessation of suffering' (*Dukha nivarana*) and

‘the path of cessation of suffering’ (*Dukha nivarana marga*). Buddha had mentioned this in his dialogue with Ananda, Buddha’s first cousin and his disciple, and Cunda, the youngest brother of Sariputta. Buddhist reference to the way towards liberation is given in the *Pasadika Stanta*. “It, May happen, Cunda, that they may ask. But what brother, is revealed by Gotama the Recluse? They are thus to be addressed:- This is Ill:- that brother, is revealed by the Exalted One- This is the Cause of Ill:- that , brother, is revealed by the Exalted One-This is the Cessation of Ill:- that brother, is revealed by the Exalted One. This is the path leading to the Cessation of Ill:- that , brother, is revealed by the Exalted One[4].” The cessation of the sufferings is possible for the individual by following the ‘*Eight fold path*’ or the Middle Path (*Ashtanga marga* or *madhyamika marga*) which includes ‘Right thought’, ‘Right speech’, ‘Right action’, ‘Right understanding’, ‘Right livelihood’, ‘Right effort’, ‘Right mindfulness’ and ‘Right concentration’. Observing them, one can cultivate the social, intellectual, moral and spiritual virtues and thereby self purification in his life.

The individual who had received the knowledge of the ‘Four Noble Truths, becomes an enlightened person or *Arhat*. He is free from all pains through *Nibbana* or cessation from sufferings and leads the rest of his social life as *Boddhisatva*. He leads the life of love and compassion for all mankind. In fact he lives in a state of total unattachment. A man of unattachment or *nissangi*, he finds himself identified with the whole, totality of wisdom or universal consciousness. The true Buddha or the man of enlightenment dwells in a state of indescribable ecstasy. He lives in the world but totally free of the mundane sorrows and pleasures. He becomes the *Jivanmukta* who is free even while alive [5]. Buddhists strongly believed that liberation or *Nirvana* could be achieved by the individual through leading the life of *Bodhisatva*. “Compassion also aids wisdom’s undercutting of self-centeredness”, by motivating a life of self-sacrifice and active service for others [6].”

Buddhism, of course, had reservations about admitting women in it’s *Sangha* during its early phase, but later on many women joined it as nuns. Thus goes the story. Maha Prajapati, Suddhodan’s second wife and Buddha’s foster-mother, along with a group of women, came to Buddha and begged for admission to the Order. But to her great sorrow it was refused. They cut off hair, put on the orange robes of a mendicant, and again approached Buddha. They had a long, weary wait before Buddha’s residence at Vesali. Ananda was deeply touched, and presented their case to his Master, who thrice repeated his refusal. Then Ananda took up the problem from another angle and asked: “Are women, if they abandon the household life and live according to the doctrine and discipline taught by the Truth-finder, capable of realizing the fruits of ‘entering the stream’, becoming a ‘once-returner’, or a ‘non-

returner’ or the state of being Arhant?” The Buddha could not deny it, and agreed that there should be an Order of Bhikkhunis, side by side with that of the Bhikkhus[7].”With the Buddhist Order of nuns having been thus started its members were actively spreading Buddha’s message to many parts of the world. The verses in the Buddhist scripture *Therigatha* were composed by the *Arhat* nuns. This composition well reflects the Buddhist nuns’ spiritual perfection, many of them pointing to their desire to get rid of the worldly bondage and their eagerness for salvation. Thus goes a verse:

“*So freed! So freed! Thoroughly freed am I!-
From three crooked things set free:
From my pestle, my shameless husband and his sun-
shade making
My moldy old pot with its water-snake smell.
Aversion and passion I cut with a chop.
Having come to the foot of a tree, I meditate, Absorbed
in the bliss
What bliss![8]”*

Buddhist literatures mention female Bodhisattva too. “The perfection of wisdom was personified as a female Bodhisattva and, figuratively, as ‘the mother of all the Buddhas. Tantric Buddhism also introduced many female holy beings associated with wisdom [9].”

Thus Buddha with his dialectical thinking had constructed a social philosophy based on the principle of equality and mutual respect. “Vivekananda says, some of the most beautiful epithets addressed to Buddha that I remember are, ‘Thou the breaker of castes, destroyer of privileges, preacher of equality to all beings [10].” Buddha also stood against priestly hierarchy that prevailed during his time. By raising his voice against the practice of Vedic sacrifices and sacraments which were monopolized by the priestly classes, he stood for the spiritual welfare of the downtrodden. “When Brahmins asked him about how to attain union with God Brahma after death, he did not say that it is impossible, but that it could be attained by meditative development of deep lovingness and compassion rather than by bloody Vedic sacrifices [11].”

With a rational outlook, Buddha stood for a secular society marked by spiritual democracy. His dynamic and humanistic approach had a positive impact on Indian society and had captured the minds of common masses. “Buddha’s doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is set forth in a domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive details than elsewhere [12].”

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