

BEYOND MATERIALISM AND SPIRITUALISM: BUDDHIST PERCEPTIVE ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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Preliminary remarks

There was a time when Buddhism was seen by scholars, especially western scholars as a teaching to focused only on world transcending liberation of the individual and therefore, with no consideration with regard to peoples day to day problems.

Based on this were built many other views. Another such a view is that Buddhism is pessimistic.¹ It was also upheld at one time that as Buddhism is a teaching aiming at transcending the world, and hence there is no social philosophy in it.² These early partial vies were held, perhaps, due to inadequacy of in-depth studies done with regard to Buddhism. However, these misconceptions have now been cleared and Buddhism is considered a full fledged religion containing treasures of information, teachings and analyses on diverse aspects of human life.

There is no denying of the fact that Buddhism started as a movement of renouncers (*Pabbajita*). The first converts namely, the *Bhikkhu* mendicants of the group of five (*Pañcavaggiyā*) requested for discipleship immediately after conversions³. The converts who followed them also sought discipleship and entrance to the order.⁴ In their missionary tours the disciples brought in more members into the order. Thus, renunciation of household life was considered a necessary pre-condition for the proper practice of the teaching. The *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*⁵ very clearly shows that household mode of life with possession of numerous things and objects necessary to the household life is really an encumbrance. Wife, children, slaves and servants, goats and sheep, fowls and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses, mares, gold and silver are all listed as objects of attachments. Thus, it is natural to find, when looked at from this perspective of renunciation, household life was considered at the very outset as full of encumberames,⁶ when compared to the life of a renouncer. Thus, the life of the renouncer came

¹ See Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, (Gordon Fraser, London, 1959), p. 17 for same enlightening remarks on themes.

² See Bhikkhu Bodhi, op. cit. p.108 f.

³ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, I, p.10.

⁴ The first sixty disciples all entered the order.

⁵ *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, 1, p. 62f.

⁶ The "Samaññaphala Sutta" of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, (I, 63f) says; "Bahu Saṃbādho gharāvāso abbhokāso pabbajjā"

to be looked upon as the ideal vocation for all those who desired to put an end to suffering, the purpose for which the Noble Life (*Brahmacariya*) is led. This life of a renouncer namely, a “*sāmaṇera*” or “*bhikkhu*” is expected to be a very simple one with few needs (*appiccha*) and restrained with regard to even the basic requirements of food, clothing, shelter and medicine. Thus monks are expected to observe morality with regard to these four requisites and in the *Vinaya* it is called “*Paccaya-sannissita-sīla*” one of the four kinds of morality consisting of purification (*Catuparisuddhi-sīla*).⁷ Thus the sole aim of the renouncers was the attainment of freedom from *dukkha*. Therefore, in their life material development did not find any role to play.

But when Buddhism spread to masses and householders in large numbers got converted, the situation changed. In the practice of Buddhism there came into being a new vocation namely, the vocation of householders (*gihī*) as against that of the renounced ones (*Pabbajita*). It is especially in this vocation that both material and spiritual development began to play important roles. This essay is an attempt to examine, how the Buddhist concept of development was formulated to suit this vocation of the householders without compromising the ideal of total ending of *dukkha*, which is the final objective of following the Buddhist path. Hence, the main focus of this paper will be on the Buddhist way of life of the householders. However, reference to the life of the renouncers will be made to show what features the lay could adopt from the life of renouncers in order to successfully attain both material and spiritual development.

Materialism and Spiritualism: the Buddha's Response

As a philosophy materialism refers to the doctrine that nothing exists except matters and its movements and modifications. It holds that mind, consciousness, will etc, are all dependent on material factors. The practice founded on this philosophy lays more emphasis on material possession and enjoyment of them, experiencing as much sensory comforts and indulgence possible. It hardly pays attention to spiritualism, and consequently denies the efficacy of ethics and morals.

Spiritualism as a philosophy refers to the doctrine that the spirit exists as distinct from matter, and that spirit is the only reality. As opposed to materialism spiritualism is only concerned with the ‘spirit’ that is said to reside in the body. The practice advocated in spiritualism is to give pain to the body and release the ‘spirit’ that is imprisoned within it.

Both materialism and spiritualism are concerned about sufferance and hardships undergone by man. Both these, in their own ways, present remedies and solutions for human predicaments. The religious traditions of the Buddha's time when analyzed broadly fall into these two kinds of teachings. In a very general way the Buddhist texts refer to these two kinds of religious traditions as Brahmaṇa tradition and Samaṇa tradition. This philosophical teaching presented by them are referred to as *Sassatavāda* (Eternalism) which denotes some kind of spiritualism and *Ucchedavāda* denoting a kind of materialism. The two practices presented by these two

⁷ See Ñānātiloka, *Buddhist Dictionary*, (Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, Singapore, 1991).

philosophical traditions were “*Attakilamathānuyoga*” (self-mortification) and “*Kāmasukhallikānyoga*” (self-indulgence), and these two practices were the ones that were mostly accepted and followed during the time Buddhism arose in India.

The Buddha commenced his mission by admonishing his followers not to resort to either of them. This is very clearly declared in his inaugural discourse *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*.⁸ Therein he says that these are two extremes generally followed by many and that those who opt to follow Buddhism should give them up. Further, he condemned “*Kāmasukhallikānuyoga*”, the path of self indulgence, as low, vulgar the way of the average ordinary person, ignoble and unbeneficial (*Hīno gammo puthujjaniko anariyo anathasaṃhito*) with regard to the path of self mortification his criticism was less severe, for he did not describe it as low vulgar, the way of the average ordinary person, but said that it is painful (*dukkha*) ignoble and unbeneficial (*Dukkho anariyo anathasaṃhito*)

Rejecting the traditionally accepted paths he, based on his world view founded on dependent origination (*Paṭiccasamuppāda*), presented a path that transcended self – indulgence and self mortification which, hence, he described as the Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*).⁹ This novel path constituted of eight factors, and hence called (*Aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) is described as the Noble Path (*Ariya-magga*) as it leads the world -lings (*Puthujjana*) who are ignoble (*Anariya*) to the noble (*Ariya*) status. The life led in accordance with this path is called Noble Life (*Brahmacariya*). This is the path the followers of the Buddha’s teaching have to tread, whether one is a lay person, or a member of the “*Saṅgha*”. As already shown the Buddha’s request was for his followers to renounce household life to facilitate total commitment to the practice. But, due to practical reasons and also due to popular requests the Buddha conceded that this path the sole object of which in human development and progress, could be allowed at a worldly (*Lokiya*) level.¹⁰

The Practice of the Path by Lay and Clergy

The Buddhist society could be divided in to many categories. The broadest of such categories is lay householders (*gihī*) and renounced ones (*Pabbajita*). With Buddhism reaching the masses and converts increasing in numbers there arose a popular demand to relax the path to enable those in the household to follow it. Such requests are found in Suttas.¹¹ Originally the path was meant to be practiced full time by the renunciators aiming at the complete ending of suffering.¹² But when householders began to embrace Buddhism they requested the Buddha for a teaching that they could follow while leading household life, which means a path that would

⁸ *Vinaya Piṭaka* I, p. 10, *Samyuttanikāya*, V, p. 420.

⁹ This is well explained in the “*Kaccāyanagotta Sutta*” of the *Samyuttanikaya*, II, 17.

¹⁰ See the analysis of the path given by the Buddha in the “*Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*” of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, (III, 71 ff).

¹¹ The “*Vyagghapajja Sutta*” of the *Anguttara Nikāya*, iv, 281f, is a good example to this

¹² The Buddha’s admonition to his early converts was “come, ‘monks’, well declared is the teaching by the Fortunate One, follow the Noble life for the complete ending of dukkha”, *Vinaya Piṭaka*, I, 10, “*Ehi bhikkhu, svakkhāto dhammo bhagavatā, cara brahmacariyā sammā dukkhassa antakiriyāya*”.

be conducive to their material well being as well as their spiritual well being. Accordingly they adjusted their immediate goal to suit their practice. Their aim was not total ending of *dukkha*, but well being of this life and life after.¹³ Just as at present even during the Buddha's time this formed the immediate objective of the average lay followers of the Buddha's teaching. In the practice of the path with this objective, of the average lay follower of the Buddha's teaching. In the practice of the path with this objective, material development and spiritual development got finely blended, surpassing pure materialism and spiritualism. The "Dhammika Sutta"¹⁴ of the *Suttanipāta* presents the two vocation, bringing out clearly the distinction between them. One is called the way of living that is in accordance with one who has renounced (*Iriyapatham pabbajitanulomikam*) and the other practices of the householders (*Gahatttha vattam*). The final goals attainable through those vocations are also different. The former leads to freedom from all defilements, for he is totally detached from all things including material things¹⁵ and the latter to birth in the divine world named, self-ruminant.¹⁶

Correlation between Material Stability and Spiritual Progress

With the relaxation of the practice to suit the needs of the lay devotees the attainment of the final goal was postponed to the future. There was no compromise in the practice whatsoever, but only a conscious and a voluntary consent of the laity to be satisfied with the winning of this world and the next world. This is the theme addressed to the householders in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*.¹⁷ The *Tevijjavacchajotta Sutta* also clearly says that the highest spiritual level that could be reached by one who leads a household life is birth in heaven.¹⁸ Thus birth in a good state (*Sugati*) in heaven (*Sagga*) became the lesser goal to be achieved in their preparation to attain the highest spiritual attainment, *Nibbāna* – the Summum-bonum of Buddhism.

When the realization of *Nibbāna* was postponed to a distant future date and attainment of happiness in this life and next life was made the immediate objective, household life was turned into the training ground for gradual spiritual progress. All Buddhist lay ethics was formulated to suit this paradigm. The practice of the 'Noble Eight Fold Path' at the mundane level, with grater emphasis as training in virtue (*Sīla*) and performance of deeds for the purpose accruing and accumulating merit (*Puñña*) became the main purpose household life.

Buddhism, being not only an empirical teaching but also a practical teaching to be lived, accepts that for beings, specially human beings, to survive there are certain material conditions that should be provided. This is why Buddhism works on the premise that all beings subsist on food.¹⁹ Therefore, human beings should essentially have a means of fulfilling their basic need of

¹³ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, IV, p. 281, "diṭṭhadhammikahitāya, sukhāya Samparjāikahitāya Sukhāya".

¹⁴ *Suttanipāta*, Stanzas Nos, 376-404.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Stanza No. 392, "Etesu dhammesu anūpalitto bhikkhu yathā pokkhare vāribindu".

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Stanza No. 404, : "Etaṃ gihī vuttāyaṃ appamatto Sayampabhe nāma upeti deve".

¹⁷ *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, 181, The objective aimed at by following the advice given in the "*Sigālovāda Sutta*" is the winning of the two worlds. (*Ubhayalokavijaya*).

¹⁸ *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, 483.

¹⁹ *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, 211, "Sabbe Sattā āhāraṭṭhitikā".

food. This is specially so with regard to householders living in the society. If this basic need is not met with there is no possibility of his inclining towards spiritual development. Therefore, some level of material well being is necessary for one to first assure one's subsistence, and it is only thus that one could direct his mind towards religious practice and spiritual development.

Suttas such as *Kūṭadanta*, *Cakkavattisihanada* and *Aggañña* bring out the close correlation between material decline and moral decline, leading chaos in spiritual practice.²⁰ In the picture presented by those *suttas* it is not difficult to see how spirituality decline in proportion to material decline. These two aspects mutually affect each other. Though material stability is not laid down as a necessary precondition for all who incline towards spiritual culture, in the case of laity it is made to look as a factor very conducive to set one's mind an spiritual culture.

In fact, both the *Kūṭadanta Sutta* and the *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* cite poverty as a cause leading to moral chaos. *Kūṭadanta Sutta* explains how moral degeneration results from poverty arising due to unemployment. This moral degeneration seriously affects the day to day life of the people threatening their life and property, and forcing them to live with doors tightly closed. The *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta* presents a very detailed picture of the chaotic conditions that arise when poverty becomes spread.²¹ The *Iṇa Sutta*²² of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* also cites poverty as a cause that seriously affects an individual's life disrupting the peace of his day to day life, and thus forcing him to neglect his moral culture and spiritual pursuit. This *Sutta* graphically explains how poverty leads a man to serious economic complication often ruining his whole life. It is in this context the *Ānana Sutta*,²³ which refers to doubtlessness as a happiness of a house holder, becomes quite meaningful when considering the relevance of material prosperity to spiritual development

Importance of Acquisition of Material Prosperity

While the renouncer is one who has cut off all his family encumbrances and obligations, it is the incumbent duty of a householder to discharge and fulfill all such duties and obligations. The *Sigālovada Sutta* which is a sort of code of ethics for householders systematically lays down those numerous obligations and duties a house holder²⁴ has to discharge. For this he has to make a living and earn an income sufficient to discharge the basic five duties expected of him. These are the five duties (*Pañcabali*)²⁵ of a householder. These duties incumbent on a householder shows that he should earn a fair income. Hence, the Buddha advices *the laity to work hard to gain material development, whereas his advice to the renounced ones is to strive to gain spiritual progress. The Jaṭṭa Sutta of the Saṃyuttanikāya says that it is the hard striving clever*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 93.

²¹ "Aggañña Sutta", of *Dīgha Nikāya* however, says that it is greed there is the primary cause of all moral decline. This is quite in keeping with the Buddhist position that there is neither a first cause nor a single cause that lead to events.

²² *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II, 130. "Ānana Sutta"

²³ *Ibid.*, II, 130.

²⁴ *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, p. 192 f.

²⁵ The five duties are: duties towards relations (*Nāti bali*), guests (*Atithi bali*), departed (*Pubbapetabali*), to the king (*Rāja bali*), deities (*Devatā bali*).

monk who is capable disentangling the tangle of life (*Ātāpi nipako bhikkhu so imarṇ vijaṭṭaye jataṇ*).

While encouraging the householders to engage in acquiring wealth the Buddha very emphatically says that the means adopted to earn wealth should be righteous. The *Pattakamma Sutta* of this *Aṅguttaranikāya*²⁶ presents the Buddha's admonition regarding how to make a righteous living. He should work with effort, with his own labour, with his own sweat, in a righteous way and earn righteously. Righteousness (*Dhamma*) should be the foundation on which one makes one's living. Hence, the Buddha's admonition is that one should earn one's living righteously, engaged in a righteous profession performing it in a manner, without resorting to any kind of malpractice. Thus one's profession should be a righteous one, performed righteously, for even a righteous profession can be practiced in corrupt way.

In this admonition there is no room for cheating, defrauding, exploitation for the purpose of making excessive profit (*Lābhena lābhaṇ Vijiginsatā*).²⁷ Besides, hoarding of wealth avariciously is utterly denounced in Buddhism. Not only is one advised to earn with effort, he is also advised to discharge his duties and be generous and charitable. Material prosperity becomes meaningful and beneficial to oneself as well to others only when one handles one's righteously acquired wealth properly.

Consumerism and Martial development

It is not surprising to find consumerism creeping into the society with material development. At present this has become a very crucial issue, for consumerism is eroding into all spheres of life, creating all kinds of problems. The sum effect of this is the dehumanization of the human individual. The individual has become a hapless victim of consumerism, losing his humanitarian qualities and also along with it the long cherished values.

While the Buddha advised the people to take steps to alleviate poverty and establish a sound economic base, he constantly warned them about the dangers of falling victims to consumerism. The Buddha presented various precautionary measures to avoid falling into the clutches of consumerism which induces individuals not only to exploit his fellow beings but even the environment which is so vital for the survival of the humankind. He used an apt parable about a fig fruit glutton (*Udumbarakhādika*)²⁸ to show the danger as well as the folly of succumbing to consumerism. In the same source the Buddha advocates the practice of balanced life (*Samajīvikatā*) as an effective check against whole heartedly embracing consumerism.

²⁶ *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II, p. 65 ff, "Uddhhanādhigatehi, bahābalaparicitehi, sedāvakkhittehi, dhammehi, dhamma laddehi".

²⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya*, III, p. 75, "Mahācattarīsaka Sutta" explains what is right livelihood for monk. This is applicable also to the lay

²⁸ "Vyagghapajja Sutta" of *Aṅguttaranikāya*, iv, 283, Its commentary, *The Manorathapūranī*, iv, 138, explains such behaviour as that of a person who wishing to eat fig fruits, causes, with one mighty stroke, many fruits to fall down and eats a few and let go waste a lot.

Besides, in order to save individuals losing their head when they attain material prosperity, the Buddha admonishes his lay followers regarding the benefits of cultivating the habit of having few desires (*Appicchatā*). It is the habit of entertaining many desires that makes an individual get confused regarding his needs and wants. Being tempted by his varied desires and individual converts all his wants into needs, and try to live beyond his means, which ultimately brings his downfall. Such confusion makes one incline towards corrupt and immoral ways of living entangling him in all sorts of evil deeds. Tempted by consumerism and varied desires one tends to fall into debt which the Buddha explains in the already cited *Iṇa Sutta* as a great misery for a pleasure enjoying householder. Though material development is not harmful, if one is not cautious about its dangers, one would get engrossed in over enjoyment of his material possession.

Regarding consumption, the Buddha presents a new view. He called this the “*Āyatana paribhojana*” in the *Pattakamma Sutta* referred to above. This means the proper handling of one’s economy, spending it wisely on the duties enunciated in the said Sutta. Besides, according to Buddhism it is not the magnitude of one’s material possessions that is of importance. In general human desire is insatiable. The *Dhammapada*²⁹ says that one is not satisfied even with a shower of gold coins. The highest wealth according to Buddhism therefore, is contentment.³⁰

Blending of Material and Spiritual Development

With regard to the laity the Buddha while upholding that material development is necessary, it says that real progress of the individual cannot be measured by the amount of his material passions. This, however, is the standard vogue in the present world. What is surprising is that this standard is accepted not only in the West but even in the East, specially South-east Asia as well as Far-east Asia which has been under the benign influence of a profound social philosophy as that of Buddhism.

Individual development and progress is judged on one’s material wealth, and the nations’ progress on the GNP and other affiliated economic statistics. Spiritual values are competently over-looked. So, we have a lop-sided concept of progress measured on the basis wealth, prosperity, sky-scrapers, five-star hotels, highways, fly-over etc. and we turn a blind eye to sanatoriums, asylums, hospices and hospitals, high-security prisons and so on. Are both these signposts of development and progress? Buddhist texts³¹ shows clearly that when corruption which we now label as means of development, become rampant even the nature, seasonal patterns and consequently food production gets adversely affected. Are these not the marked features of modern developed and developing societies and countries? Have we not either advertently or inadvertently turned upside down the concept of development and progress? Should we not ask ourselves whether we need search for our roots, and turn to the Buddha’s teaching on

²⁹ *Dhammapada*, Stanza No. 186, “Na kahāpana Vassena...”

³⁰ *Dhammapada*, Stanza No. 204, “Santutthī paramaṃ dhanam

³¹ *Anguttara Nikāya*, II, p. 75, “Adhammika Sutta”.

human development and progress which takes into account also the environment, together with the flora and the fauna, which is so important for the survival human being?

For all interested in this true concept of 'development' as enunciated by the Buddha the *Dvi cakkhu Sutta*³² gives the clue. Through this *Sutta* the Buddha explains what really is the concept of development and progress of human beings. It should be a five blend of both material development and spiritual development. A householder who emphasizes one over the other would be acting like a one-eyed individual, seeing only one of the two equally important aspects of the total life. It is this partial vision that has misled the present world and pushed it into consumerism with the total neglect of spiritual culture. To make life more meaningful and beneficial to oneself as well as to others we have to correct our vision regarding what development and progress is and adopt a suitable life pattern.

This vision should be one that transcends both materialism and spiritualism. Herein, too, the laity should adopt a 'middle position', with what is wholesome (*Kusala*) that is beneficial to one and all, as the guiding principle of his life. This will enable an individual to lead a materially and spiritually developed life that which is neither tilted towards materialism nor towards spiritualism, but by parsing both.

Note

All Pāli references are to Pāli texts of the Pāli Texts Society of London

³² *Anguttara Nikāya*, I, p. 130, "Dvicakkhusutta", "Andham ca ekachakkhum ca – rakparivajjaye dvicakkhum pana sevetha-settham purisa puggalam".