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Applications of Dhamma

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by

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Applications of Dhamma

Transcendence



Transcendence is the chief characteristic virtue of Buddhism. In our daily devotions we remind ourselves of the Buddha's transcendental wisdom, which implies knowledge of all and attachment to none. Then we call to mind his purity, which, being absolute, surpasses the realm of all defilements (*kilesa*) and outflows (*āsavā*). Again, we focus our thoughts on his untrammelled loving kindness, which embraces all living beings, extending beyond the barriers of caste, creed, nationality and the like. In fact, we can think of him in countless other ways, but those ways may be summed up under the above-mentioned Threefold Nobility, which is the synopsis of his virtue and which intrinsically reflects one and the same characteristic virtue: transcendence.

For how could wisdom be full and final or, in Buddhist terminology, supramundane (*lokuttara*),

without transcending the mundane conditions?

Again, how could purity be absolute without transcending once and for all the realm of passions and defilements?

And lastly, how could compassion or loving kindness be untrammelled or all-embracing (*appamañña*) without transcending the barriers of pride and prejudice based on caste, creed, nationality, race, and the like?

But it is a sad fact, that many people, including some Buddhists, have misunderstood, and thereby misinterpreted, this characteristic virtue of transcendence to the detriment of their own progress on the Buddha's Path. They often regard the virtue of transcendence as permitting negligence at the lower stages of development, treating it with cynical contempt, and only considering whatever is to be transcended at the highest stage. The following facts will serve to indicate the relevance of the virtue of transcendence at all stages in the practice of Buddhism and clarify the Buddhist attitude as far as the characteristic virtue of transcendence is concerned.

(1) Three Steps of Advantage

Obviously, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is renunciation of the fleeting world, pleasure and enjoyment, for the sake of the unshakable and

deathless condition of Nibbāna. But the Buddha knew how widely different sentient beings are with regard to their environment as well as their spiritual capacity for understanding and following his teaching. So he laid down two other, although lower steps of advantage, viz., the advantage obtainable in the present life (*diṭṭhadhammikattha*) and the advantage obtainable in the future life or lives (*samparāyikattha*). The first is purely earthly, whereas the second is half earthly and half spiritual. These two, however, are still on the mundane plane (*lokiya*), being conducive to rebirth (*vaṭṭagāmi*), and are the elementary and intermediate stages suitable for most people, whereas the third advantage aims at the supramundane (*lokuttara*) or breaking the circle of rebirth (*vivaṭṭagami*), and is reserved for the strong in heart and mind and will. With these three steps of advantage or practice well defined and distinguished, it is plain to see that Buddhism does not force the life of renunciation upon anybody who is not mature enough for such an advanced course of self-training.

(2) Body and Mind

Buddhism, being a system of practice for spiritual development, emphasis is laid more on the mind than on the body. But this does not mean that the body is to be totally neglected. It is by giving it proper care and attention, neither indulging its carnal desires nor

neglecting its natural, purely physical needs, that real spiritual growth can be expected. This is maintaining the point of balance or, in Buddhist terminology, the Middle Way. Thus we can conclude that Buddhism does not neglect the proper care and attention given to the body.

Mindfulness regarding the body is the only way to ensure that neither of the two unskilful extremes is adopted when dealing with it. These two extremes—sensual indulgence and mortification of the flesh—have been mentioned by the Buddha in his first discourse and thereafter he frequently explained their shortcomings as ways of action. The Middle Way is mindful attention towards the body, realising thereby that it is conditioned and compounded of different elements, as well as being a collection of organs certain to decay sooner or later.

Instead of trying, ostrich-like, to disregard the hell of bodily ageing, death and dissolution, the Buddhist tradition insists that one must not attempt to repress awareness of these inevitable facts but bring them into the focus of the fully conscious mind by deliberately meditating upon them.

Then, having to some extent attained a detachment from the body, having lessened self-identification with it, the body may then be regarded as an "instrument of

Dhamma.” It will then become most precious and valuable a thing with which one is enabled to practise the Dhamma for one’s own and others’ benefit. But at first it cannot be regarded in this way; otherwise the dangers of conceit and the wrong view of “my body” may be strengthened.

(3) Economic Aspects of Living

The Buddhist goal transcends that of economics, it is true, for whereas economics caters for the increase of wealth and gratification of desires, Buddhism advocates as its highest goal a life of simplicity and paucity of wants, and preaches the method of subduing and eliminating desires. But in the first step of advantage, which is purely worldly, Buddhism also stresses the acquisition of wealth through diligence and the safeguarding of the acquired wealth through being economical. This shows that the Buddha understood how indispensable money is to worldly matters and thus how important are the acquisition and the safeguarding of wealth, which is nothing but the economic aspect of the life of those who cannot as yet renounce the world altogether. So it is clear that Buddhism does not ignore the economic aspect of living.

This may be seen from the lives and laws of such great Buddhist rulers as the emperor Asoka in India,

or more recently King Mongkut in Thailand. They clearly desired the welfare of their subjects and led the way by showing them the practical application of loving kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy (*mettā, karuṇā, muditā*) to everyday life.

The modern concept of the welfare state that dispenses from its material wealth numerous benefits to the old, the poor, and the sick, remains an empty and bureaucratic idea unless its charities are given in the spirit of loving kindness and so forth. Unfortunately this is not always the case and, therefore, many are found who express a preference for acts of benevolence performed by individuals who really desire the welfare of those whom they benefit.

(4) Worship with Flowers and Offerings

Buddhism transcends the idea of clinging to the conventional methods of worship as the ideal way of showing love and respect towards the Buddha. We know this from the Buddha's attitude manifesting throughout his life and especially from his own words just before he passed away to the effect that the embodiment of his teaching into our daily lives and affairs is the highest worship his disciples can hope to offer to him. But it does not mean that the kind of worship with flowers and offerings is to be banned. For it is the proper evaluation of each method of

worship that will prevent Buddhists from extolling one and condemning another. Thus the Buddhist method may transcend, but it does not ban, the kind of worship performed with flowers and offerings.

Many Buddhists, at the time of making these traditional offerings, use the occasion for a little discursive meditation. Thus, the Buddha is remembered when lighting the candle or lamp, while the Dhamma which is fragrant with good conduct and other fair qualities is thought of when the incense sticks are offered. The offering of flowers is then made recollecting the bright and beautiful virtues of the Ariyan (noble) Sangha.

Besides offerings, worship is traditionally made by the triple prostration of the body as well as by placing together one's palms. These are attitudes of reverence recognised in many religions. In Buddhism, it is well understood that provided that they are accompanied by mindfulness, they help to promote faith, humility and gentleness in the individual performing them and are thus for his own spiritual benefit. Of course, they have nothing to do with the worship of an idol. Much the same may be said of the verses and passages chanted by Buddhists at this time. They are often in Pali and describe the virtues of the Triple Gem, thus expressing the devotion and gratitude of the follower and his inward recollection of them.

(5) Two Grades of Truth

Again, the Buddhist ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*) transcends the realm of worldly apposition (*loka-sammuti*), worldly definition (*loka-paññatti*) and worldly ways of expression (*loka-vohāra*), but never does Buddhism deny the value and truth of those worldly attributes on their own plane. The Buddha introduced the *anattā* (non-self) doctrine as the unique aspect of Buddhism, but in matters of everyday life he also spoke in terms of *attā* like other people, when it concerned non-philosophical, practical affairs. The Buddha analysed man into the five aggregates of existence (*khandha*), void of such designations as "father," "mother," "I," "mine," and the like, but he never rejected the relative validity of such designations in the realm of conventional truth (*sammuti-sacca*). Hence the vital and irreconcilable difference between Buddhism and the various doctrines of idealistic nihilism which categorically deny the relative truth in the relative sense of these terms on the relative plane to which they belong. Here again, it is beyond doubt that Buddhism transcends, but does not deny, the relative or suppositional truth (*sammuti-sacca*) on its own plane. On the other hand, it does not regard relative truth as being the only reality, as does materialism.

(6) Two Steps of Merit

With all these aforementioned facts at hand, it is now fairly safe to conclude that the transcendental virtue of Buddhism never implies negligence or contempt of the lower stages of development that cannot be ignored if one wishes to attain to the higher stages and the final goal. For everything has its own value in its own place, and a wise man is he who knows how to evaluate things justly, neither overrating nor underestimating anything. The first step of a ladder is lower than the second, it is true, but its value as a means by which a person is helped to the second can by no means be ignored and nobody in his right mind would ever dream of treating it with contempt even though he has already risen to the second or a higher step.

Hence merit (*kusala*) in Buddhism is in a sense of two grades: viz., *vattaṅgāmi* and *vivattaṅgāmi*. The former, being comparatively easy, leads a person to a better rebirth with more felicities of life and may be called mundane merit (*lokiya-kusala*), whereas the latter, which is more difficult, is conducive to transcending the cycle of rebirth and may be called supramundane merit (*lokuttara-kusala*). In the realm of the former, there is no objection or prohibition that a person should seek for prestige and power for himself or for his country or for both, provided that he uses means that are consistent with Dhamma or the law of

righteousness on the mundane level.

The teaching of Buddhism is that one's deliberate action (*kamma*) will very likely be followed by experiences resulting therefrom (*phala*, *vipāka*). Skilful action (*kusala*) is productive of pleasurable resultants, while pain will follow him who acts against Dhamma or the Law of Righteousness. A bhikkhu or other person living a life of renunciation is naturally spared a great many of the conflicts which arise for the layman. The layman especially has therefore to act in such situations by bearing kamma and its fruits in mind while measuring his actions against the high standard set by Buddhist wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). Naturally, the Buddhist who deeply appreciates and practises the precepts formulated by his Teacher, avoids killing and therefore warfare, whenever possible. Any decision to take part in armed combat that he may make, as in defence of his country against invaders, is his own responsibility and he must be prepared to shoulder the burden of any unskilful actions (such as killing) that he may commit.

To sum up then, the following facts may serve to remind Buddhists, and non-Buddhists as well, of how in Buddhism the virtue of transcendence never implies negligence or a sweeping condemnation of what is to be transcended except that at the highest stage, for:

Buddhism transcends, but does not condemn, the life of a layman.

Buddhism transcends, but does not neglect, proper care and attention given to the body.

Buddhism transcends, but does not ignore, economic aspects of living.

Buddhism transcends, but does not prohibit, worship with flowers and offerings.

Buddhism transcends, but does not deny, conventional or suppositional truth.

Buddhism transcends, but does not censure, the love of and devoted service to one's own country.

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