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## Buddhist Ethics, Moral Perfection and Modern Society

Criteria of rationality laid down in the methods of modern science and the materialist outlook associated with it, are the most dominant influences on the intellectual life of modern man. A large section of modern intellectuals subjected to these influences have rejected metaphysics and dogmatic religion along with a host of traditional moral values. Scientific rationality has undoubtedly resulted in tremendous material progress. It cannot, however, be claimed that human beings in the modern world live more contented lives, feeling safe and secure, and that their interests will not be unjustly harmed by fellow human beings. Armed conflicts are rampant in the modern world. Acts of terrorism, violation of human rights, racial and other types of discrimination, violence against innocent human beings are some of the horrendous moral crimes that we frequently witness in many parts of the world. Poverty and destitution are not uncommon. In Buddhist terms scientific and technological progress has in no way resulted in the reduction of the unwholesome roots of human behaviour, namely, greed, hatred and delusion. As long as these roots of unwholesome behaviour are not drastically reduced or are kept within reasonable limits, it would not be possible to think of peace, harmony, happiness and contentment in society. The relevance of Buddhism to the modern social context lies in the fact that it offers a philosophical middle way that recognizes in principle the norms of scientific rationality, while rejecting both the extreme materialist world-view of modern science and the metaphysical and dogmatic fundamentalism of traditional religion.

Modern science does not provide us with the knowledge of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. When human beings are not concerned with such knowledge, and do not care to pursue the principles of a morally good life, social interaction among humans is not likely to become very different from that among brutes. One of the most important features that distinguishes life among humans from life among brutes is that human beings desire not only to live, but also to live well. They search for meaning in life, and seek to attain rationally justifiable moral ideals and goals. In this respect Buddhist morality has much to offer to modern man.

Buddhism can be considered as a path of moral perfection. The entire path is comprised of gradual stages of ethical purification. This is the reason why it was traditionally described as a *visuddhimagga*. The goal of Buddhism is a modification of a person's behaviour and a transformation of a person's emotive and cognitive constitution. The consequence of this modification and transformation is that the person concerned overcomes the ills of existence and ceases to produce suffering to others. The goal of Buddhism is defined purely in psychological terms. It is not merging with God or Brahman or surviving to eternity in some incomprehensible realm of Being, but becoming free from greed, hatred and delusion.

The ethical teaching of Buddhism advocates an ideal of moral perfection as its ultimate goal. Moral perfection is attained when the unwholesome psychological roots of human behaviour, namely, greed, hatred and delusion are eradicated. They are described as unwholesome roots (*akusalamūla*) because it is through their influence that people are motivated to commit unethical acts such as destruction of life, causing harm or injury to other living beings, misappropriation

of the belongings of others, indulgence in sexual misconduct and the wrongful enjoyment of sense pleasures, the use of false, harsh, frivolous and slanderous speech, etc. Buddhism recognizes a valid basis for the distinctions people make between what is morally right or wrong and good or bad. According to the Buddhist teachings, a valid basis for making moral judgements has to be discovered with reference to human experience, but not with reference to any metaphysical reality. The conditions under which human beings become happy and contented and the conditions under which they find life miserable are generally the same. Factual information about those conditions are directly relevant to our moral life. They are to be discovered by means of observation and experience. To live morally is to live paying due regard to the moral point of view, which involves the avoidance of the creation of misery to oneself and others as well as the alleviation of the suffering of others. As long as people pay attention to human experience itself they need not lose faith in the importance of morality. To be concerned with morality is to be concerned with human good and harm, happiness and unhappiness, ill and well-being.

The significance of Buddhism to modern society is that it does not seek to determine the issue of what is right and wrong by tying the moral life to a set of metaphysical dogmas from which moral precepts are derived, or to the moral commandments of a sectarian God. People who have given up metaphysics and religious dogma in preference to the modern scientific, materialist and deterministic view of existence have moved towards a sceptical stance on the nature of moral values. They tend to associate morality with metaphysics and religion. The consequence of this attitude is the creation of a moral vacuum in their lives. Under such circumstances greed, hatred and delusion become the motivating forces of their behaviour.

The materialist and determinist ideology associated with modern science, which is seeking to displace metaphysics and religious dogma, attempts to transform society by effecting changes in the material conditions of living. The scientific world-view attaches no significance to the importance of morality. Morality is considered as a matter of attitudes and emotions. Moral values are considered to be relative and subjective. According to this view, only empirical facts have objectivity. Man is considered merely as a stimulus-response mechanism. Man's capacity to understand and control the inner motivational roots of behaviour appears to gain little recognition in terms of the mechanistic world view of material science. Human behaviour is explained in terms of the external conditions that determine it. If external factors alone determine human behaviour, people cannot be responsible for their moral failings. They cannot be blamed for what they do. Such a view of the nature of human action encourages the renunciation of personal responsibility for what people do.

The problems of modern society may be explained from the Buddhist standpoint as a consequence of the separation of scientific knowledge and technological skill from moral wisdom. There is ample evidence of the proliferation of greed and hatred at all levels of social interaction in modern society. It has created economic disparity, poverty and destitution. The lack of concern for the cultivation of sympathetic concern for the well-being of others is leading to increased social conflict and tension. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist way of life is the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. If much of the psychological insanity that produces moral crises in modern society is the consequence of the proliferation of greed, hatred and delusion, then the Buddhist ideal of moral perfection can be said to be directly relevant to the social life of modern man.

—Prof. P.D. Premasiri

## Book Review

*Inner Tranquillity — The Buddha's Path to Freedom*, Allan James. Aukana Trust, Wiltshire, 2001. pp. 199. Contents, text, index, Price £7.95. ISBN-0-9511769-8-6

This is an edited version of the original sent by the reviewer. (Ed.)

*Inner Tranquillity* by Allan James is one of the best books on the teaching (Dhamma) of the Buddha, written by a person of great learning, yet very much unknown so far among the scholarly world.

The reviewer himself was not impressed at the first glance of the book, having been biased on an unknown or less known author from the European (or Western) sector of Buddhist scholars.

However the reviewer had to cast away all his doubts about the skill and scholarship of Alan James when he gradually perused the chapters of the new book which is the second book published by the author (first being *The Unfolding of Wisdom*).

It is amazing to find the deep knowledge combined with a wholesome experience gained in putting into practice the Buddha Dhamma by the author before he set upon his task of putting into writing a book of this nature. It is a book not only worthy of reading but of using as a constant reference work. One may say that this book is a worthy expression of the triple advice to study, understand and practise the good norm of the Buddha: (*sunāta, dhāretha, carātha dhamme*).

In seventeen carefully arranged topics which form the chapters of this well-written book, the author takes the reader on a gradual process to examine and explain the Middle Path (*Majjhimā Paṭipadā*) revealed by the Buddha and Buddha alone, amongst the large number of philosophers, sages, seers and founders of religions the world has seen.

In lucid simple language and in a clear style, probably developed for the purpose, the author makes a brilliant effort to present his thesis before the reader, who may be either a layman or a religious or a scholar, catering to all.

The abstruse "liturgical or philosophical thought" which would take many written passages or chapters for an average Buddhist scholar to explain, Alan James presents in his charming pithy style so that the reader would yearn to go from one chapter to the other without any ennui.

The author quotes profusely from the day to day life wisdom of gnomic and didactic tales, legends and parables to elucidate further a doctrinal point or a moral precept that is a must for the practitioner, to reach the desired goal.

He never hesitates to emphasize the fact that of all the worthy and benevolent goals one aims to fulfil there is none more worthy than the goal in the blissful state of Nibbāna, and having set up one's mind towards achieving that goal one should begin the first step on the path to final purification with spiritual tranquillity and on a firm moral and ethical foundation. This was exactly what the erudite fifth century commentator of Buddhist Scriptures, the redoubtable Buddhaghosa, emphatically spelled out at the outset of his magnum-opus the *Visuddhimagga* (*Path of Purification*): *Sīle patitṭhāya naro sapañño—cittaṃ paññaṃ ca bhāvayaṃ* (the wise man, having established himself on morality, should cultivate mindfulness and wisdom).

Like those great meditation masters the author, without claiming such laurels, beautifully arranges his sermon-like chapters for the reader to awaken his or her interest towards the successful completion of his/her avowed wish, the wish to seek and obtain the complete liberation from Samsaric bondage, which has to be achieved through a determined effort of non-attachment and of non-clinging to the insatiable thirst (*taṇhā*) that shackles all sentient beings in

the vast cosmos entangling them into a miserable continuity of life – arising and vanishing, birth and death.

Despite our praiseworthy comments on the book we have to strike a dissentient note also, when the author comments that “the state known as *Arahant* is generally but mistakenly taken to be synonymous with enlightenment” (p.192). The author expressly states that he (the *Arahant*) is not at that point enlightened. “At this stage he is at the gateway to enlightenment but has still to pass through.”

Here the author has failed to emphasize the *Arahant*’s basic qualification which is his achievement of freedom from further birth. In point of enlightenment the *Arahants* are usually assigned a lesser status compared to the self-enlightened ones who are far superior to an ordinary *Arahant*. What is common to them is their achievement of Freedom from *Saṃsāra*. Hence *Arahants* have no further gateways to pass through in that respect. Thus this is a mistaken observation. The *Arahant* is also a term used with reference to the fully-awakened Buddha (*Sammā Sambuddha*, *Pacceka Buddha*, and *Arahant Buddha*) and they also do not accumulate any further *saṅkharas* (kamic formations). They have arrived at the summit of their goal and as such not subject to further rebirth. I hope Alan James will oblige to rectify the error.

Alan James has performed the task of a good guide to those who will yearn to undertake the difficult but worthy task of escaping the “*dukkha*” (which term expresses the most prominent factor in the three signata of existence as explained by the Buddha and translated into English variously as misery, pain, unsatisfactoriness etc.,) and entering the path that leads to deathlessness, the Supreme Bliss of *Nibbāna*.

The reader will expect more and more from the pen of this new guru of Theravada Buddhism who, we can visualize, is now entering into the stage where his great erudite pioneers and predecessors have performed much for the weal and wellbeing of the path-finder.

The book is a sign-post directing the wayfinder on his long and difficult journey that terminates in the pleasant, beatific, blissful state, the “*Nibbānaṃ Paramaṃ Sukhaṃ*’.

—Reviewed by A.D.T.E. Perera.

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## Books Available

*History of the Buddhist Sangha in India and Sri Lanka* by Gunaratne Panabokke

*Twin Peaks: Compassion of Insight* by Prof. Padmasiri de Silva

*Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therigāthā* by Kath

*The Art of Living: Vipassana Meditation As Taught By S.N. Goenka* by William Hart

*Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis* by Prof. David Kalupahana

*Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: An anthology of Suttas from the Anguttara Nikaya*, Translated and edited by Nyanaponika Thera & Bhikkhu Bodhi

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## Guidelines to Sutta Study

Metta Sutta (Karaṇiya Metta Sutta).

In the lives of the Asian Buddhists, particularly of the Sri Lankan ones, the Metta Sutta has an unbeatable record of wide popularity. While being organically contained in the Uraga Vagga of the Sutta Nipāta (verses 143-152), it has also come to be included in the collection of Minor Anthologies, referred to in Pali as the Khuddakapāṭha (pp.8-9). It is an unusually abridged sutta of only ten verses of four lines each. In spite of its remarkable brevity, the sutta reveals its purpose with an impressive clarity and directness.

The sutta begins with its very first verse telling us that “he who wishes to attain to that blissful state of tranquillity of Nibbāna (*Karaṇīyaṃ atthakusalena yaṃ taṃ santaṃ padaṃ abhisamecca*) should do the following.” The last verse, i.e. No.10, ends with the line which says that “he who develops loving-kindness in the manner indicated comes to the termination of his saṃsāric continuance, or in other words, that he shall not be born again in a mother’s womb” (*Na hi jātu gabbhaseyyaṃ punareti” ti.*). A closer scrutiny of the sutta’s entire contents as a whole gives one the feeling that the sutta is not unaware of the fact that an honest pursuit of the goal of *Nibbāna* carries with it a rich flavour of true renunciation.

This sutta is highly prescriptive in character in that it lays down in no uncertain terms what an aspirant to *bodhi* or enlightenment, which bestows ultimate peace as against saṃsāric turmoil (*santaṃ padaṃ abisamecca*), should undertake to perform (*karaṇīyaṃ atthakusalena*). These virtuous qualities of life, which need to be acquired at the very outset, are basically laid down at the level of household life, in the living reality of humans, whether men, women or children. They are not bestowed on humans from outside, through the grace of an external power whom one has to supplicate or pray to. The very first virtue of competence, ability or skill as implied in the word *sakko* reveals this very essential anthropocentric nature of Buddhist spiritual culture.

This is followed by *uju* and *sūju* which denote honesty, and uprightness in application. Besides honesty in transactions which humans need in their day to day life, there has also to be sincerity of purpose, devotion and dedication in the hearts of humans. It is in such a culture alone that any spiritual growth can be founded. The sutta adds three more lovely virtues which would invariably be the envy of gods and men. They are *suvaro*, *muḍu* and *anatiṃānī*.

*Suvaro* means one who has pleasant speech (pleasant-spoken). It is quite often rendered as obedient. We believe this is not what the original Pali implies. Obedience is connoted by the Pali word *assavo* which means “willing to listen to.” Next comes the concept of *muḍu* which means gentle, flexible and malleable (its opposite being rough and rugged). Finally in this group of down to earth virtues we get “not being arrogant” (*anatiṃānī*). All these are contained in the first verse of the sutta and are prescriptive enough to make first class citizens of men, women and children anywhere in the world.

What follows hereafter swing in the direction of renunciation or homelessness. They portray a diligently circumscribed life which is calculated to lead to the desired goal of moving away from the world. They speak of a person who is content and easily supportable, with minimum involvement in worldly affairs.

Thereafter, such a detached person is called upon to further his spiritual culture by developing his attitude of loving-kindness or *mettā* towards all living beings—*mettañca sabbalokasmiṃ mānaṣaṃ bhāvaye aparimāṇaṃ*. As the very name Metta Sutta implies, this is the main theme of this sutta. This perfected development of *mettā* is believed to be capable of leading to *saṃsāra*’s termination—*na hi jātu gabbhaseyyaṃ punar eti*.

This in brief is the scope of the Metta Sutta. A diligent human being, man or woman, makes his or her way towards the aspired spiritual goal along this path of cultured living. However, in the course of Buddhist history, time and tradition has stepped in here (and it is difficult to say precisely as to when and where), and given this sutta a strange slant, making it more of a talisman, a source of power to ward off distress, disturbances and discomfort coming from external sources like angered divinities and disgruntled evil spirits. This, we believe, is invariably the result of an emerging Commentarial interpretation, coming down through an Aṭṭhakathā tradition which possibly is traceable even to pre-Buddhaghosa times.

The Suttanipāta Aṭṭhakathā of Buddhaghosa Thera, called the *Paramatthajotikā*, writing on the Metta Sutta, gives a story of monks who had taken up residence for their Rains R'treat in a forest area which was the abode of tree deities. The deities who had taken their residence on tree tops were seriously inconvenienced by the monks who were dwelling below under the trees. They endeavoured to expel them from the region of their residence by creating fearful visions and dreadful sounds. The health of the monks is said to have suffered seriously on account of this. They returned to the Buddha and reported the matter. This story occurs also in the Khuddakapāṭha Commentary in identical form.

Cutting a long story short, the Buddha advised those monks to return to their old residence, saying that no other place could be found for them anywhere in the whole of India (*Bhagavā āvajjento sakala-Jambudīpe antamaso catupāda — paṭhakanamattaṃ pi tesaṃ sappāya-senāsanāṃ nāddasa*). As a protective measure to guard themselves against the threats posed by the deities, the Buddha is said to have preached this sutta to the monks for personal chanting (*Sace pana devatāhi abhayaṃ icchatha imaṃ parittaṃ uggaṇhātha.*)

It is interesting to note that the Commentary makes the Buddha add further that this *paritta* will also serve as a *kammaṭṭhāna* or theme of meditation.

The grand finale of this Commentarial exposition with regard to the origin of this sutta is when it says that “the Buddha delivered this sutta to those bhikkhus for the purpose of providing a basis for the development of loving kindness (*mettatthaṃ ca*), a source of protection (*parittatthaṃ ca*) and for the purpose of providing a jhānic basis for the generation of transcendental wisdom” (*vipassanā-pādaka-jjhānatthaṃ ca*).

—Ed.

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