

BUDDHIST ETHICAL APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE SOCIETIES

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ABSTRACT

The Buddhist quest for sustainable societies is a 'duty' based phenomenon, in which each and every individual has to share social responsibilities of his/her own in his/her full capacities. Reverence for duty and duty consciousness is a well known ethical concept which play an important role in the betterment of society. Lord Buddha was not interested in metaphysical questions rather he addressed himself to the questions of ethics. The aim of Buddha's 'Dhamma' was to liberate human beings from worldly sufferings and the cycle of birth and death. The ultimate end of life no doubt is liberation which means cessation from sufferings but it never allowed a person to forego his/her social responsibilities and duties.

Buddha's first sermon i.e. "Dharma Chakra Pravartan" laid down the very foundation of Buddhist ethics. No society can be sustained in the absence of moral values and virtues. Buddha's teachings provide us a simple and noble code of conduct irrespective of caste, creed or race, which teaches us how to live in an ideal society, with a follow-up of 'Right Conduct', which is a pre-requisite for a sustainable society. Buddhist ideal of 'Bodhisattava' is an excellent example of social responsibilities and duty-consciousness. It tells us that, to work for one's own liberation is not enough rather one should take care of other members of the society and work for the welfare of whole mankind.

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Buddhist ethical motto is 'Bahujan Hitaya and Bahujan Sukhaya', which is undoubtedly required for the establishment of sustainable societies. The Buddha taught 'Four Sublime Abode" (Chattari Brahmaviharani); universal love (Metta) compassion (Karuna), sympathetic joy (Mudita) and the feeling of equanimity (Upekkha) not only for the establishment of sustainable societies but also for the universal brotherhood.

The present study resulted in some of the most sophisticated ethical teachings of Lord Buddha which are very much required for the realisation of shared responsibilities for sustainable societies, as will be shown.

At present, the world is passing through great crisis because of one side of development of science and technology which is endangering the very existence of man and society. Man is losing his moral and spiritual mournings. There is a cut short throat competition for material possession and enjoyment. There is a scant regard for human values which bind man with himself and with society. Conscientious people are deeply concerned by this fact and constantly warn the world of the unsuitability of materialistic rule over man. At this moment the rise of a new spiritual civilisation is strongly demanded by people and that is humane relationship. An urge of the establishment of sustainable societies which should be based on certain fundamental values and provide a healthy and peaceful environment for human beings are also urgently needed.

Here arises certain questions in our mind such as: -Can Buddhism be a suitable alternative for this? Does Buddhist model of ethical values be a best option for sustainable societies in which each and every individual has to share his /her social responsibilities for the establishment of an ideal and sustainable society. The answer may be both positive or negative, which depends on the personal interpretation of the individuals based on different mind-sets. Present paper aimed at to give a critical analysis of the Buddhist ethical values and teachings, which will definitely be proved as an urgent requirement for the realisation of shared responsibilities of sustainable societies.

Lord Buddha, the blessed one arose thousands of years ago against all the evils of present time and attained Buddha hood to show the human beings oppressed by sufferings, the path of cessation from sufferings and the path of Nirvana. It was really not an early task. The Buddha lived as Bodhisattva all the time for the welfare of the other human beings.

Buddha's first sermon i.e.-'Dharma Chakra Pravartan'¹ laid down the very foundation of Buddhist ethics. As we know, no society can be sustained in the absence of moral values and virtues. If we have a look on the present scenario we find that the fundamental values and cardinal virtues such as love, Benevolence, compassion, happiness, Dana, Shila peace, prajna and Dharma are fast vanishing from this world. High ambitions, money, fame, pomp and show, glamour and corruption are taking place. The modern world is engrossed with all these vicious values. In the ancient times too these vicious values prevailed, though not in such a large proportion.

Buddhist ethical teachings provide us a simple and noble code of conduct, irrespective of cast, creed or race, which teaches us how to live in an ideal society with a follow-up of 'Right conduct' which is a pre-requisite for a sustainable society.

Let us examine major ethical theories of Buddhism i.e. The Eightfold path, four Brahmaviharas, concept of Bodhisattava and the Buddha's Dhamma; among all these, we first take up Buddhist notion of Eight fold path (*Ashtangika Marga*).

The whole of the Buddhist discipline as coming under the path can be divided into three sections, viz, prajna, Shila and Samadhi; physical, mental and intellectual practices. In the ethical quest and philosophic achievement of Buddhism, three concepts have come to occupy a very significantly important role. According to traditional view, the three sections of the way, Sila, Samadhi and Prajna were divided into eight-fold path (*Atthangika Maggo*) by Buddha himself.²

1. Mahavagga Nalanda Edition, P-13 (*Dhamma Chakka Pavation*).

2. Goyal, S.R.; *A History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 143.

The first section of the path is 'Prajna', the intellectual discipline denoted by 'Samma Sankappa' (*Samyaka Sankalpa*) Right Resolve and 'Samma ditthi' (*Right views, Samayaka-Drishti*). The stress on Right views or (*Right vision*) indicates that ethical norms should be based on the realisation of fundamental truths. The urge for developing a virtuous mind in the world governed by the inescapable law of dukha, can be designated as the criterion of morality in Buddhism. It is observed in the 'Dhammapada', "The ignorant is not aware that we must all come to an end here, but those who realise this, their quarrels cease at once by their knowledge".³

"Sammayak Sankalpa" (Right resolve) or right aspirations, is an important step prescribed by the Buddha in ennobling and purifying human intentions. "This concept has important social implications and it is necessary for the growth of the feeling of benevolence and kindness to all beings."⁴

'Shila' is the second section of noble path. The virtue of 'Shila' or physical practice is a comprehensive moral code. According to Buddhism, Samayaka-vaka (*Right Speech*), Samayaka Karmanta (*Right action*), Samayaka-ajiva (*Right livelihood*) and Samayaka Vyayama (*Right efforts*) comes under the virtue of "Shila". Samayavaka-vaka should be cultivated by refraining from the use of harsh and abusive words. Restraints over the use of language helps internal and external peace and is a social virtue that wins esteem and prestige in life. Similarly, 'Samayaka Karmanta' is an important and essential quality for the formation of an ideal character. Samayaka ajiva is not only essential for an ascetic life but is also important for a social being. It fosters moral living and proposes to moralise our economic life, which should eschew vulgar actions, and profit-motivation. It also emphasises the use of right means of livelihood. 'Samayaka Vyayam' is a morally psychological training which is directed to the suppression and eradication of all evil states. It helps to preserve and increase good thoughts and guards the mind against pollution by fresh evil thoughts.

It has been emphasized by the Buddha in the last two verses

3. *Dhammapada*; 1.6.

4. Jatav, D.R.; *Buddism in modern world*, 2007, P-72.

of the ‘Yamakavagga’ in the Dhammapada that ‘in spite of being conversant in the moral precepts (*silas*) as enunciated in the Buddhist scriptures, one who does not put them in practice fails to obtain the fruits of the life of a recluse, “like a cowboy who tends other’s kine; whereas one who has little knowledge of the precepts but puts them into practice obtains his share in the fruits of life of a recluse”⁵

The Third and the last section of path is known as ‘Samadhi’ which includes in itself Samayaka Smriti and Samayaka Samadhi; the last two steps of eight fold path. “Samayaka Smiriti and Samayaka Samadhi i.e. the mental discipline is so vital in Buddhist ethics and philosophy and which is Buddhism does not imply only the concentration of mind”⁶

Samayaka-Smriti (*Right mindfulness*) is a continuous process of mental training which helps to remove all cravings. With a strenuous practice the body and mind is so trained that no desire or dejection can creep into and the aspirant builds up a strong moral character by becoming ardent, vigilant, self-possessed and quiet with Samayaka Samadhi (*Right contemplation*) is attained the culmination of the ethical process and the mind becomes calm and serene.

The other ethical process is known in Buddhism as the ‘Brahma Viharas’ consisting of Four ennobling categories goes in close relationship with the noble eightfold path. The Buddha taught ‘Four sublime Abode’ (*Chattari Brahmaviharani*), Universal love (*Metta*), compassion (*Karuna*), sympathetic joy (*Mudita*) and the feeling of equanimity (*Upekha*) not only for the establishment of sustainable societies but also for the universal brotherhood.

‘Metta’ or ‘Metta-Bhavana’, the first Bhama-Viharas, is one of the most important concept in Buddhist ethics having great social implications. It enjoins as a Buddha-disciple to be always solicitous for the well-being and happiness of all creatures in the universe, known or unknown, born or yet to be born. The word ‘Metta’ is generally translated as friendliness. It is not limited to a single individual or individual country. The Buddha’s metta is a

5. Dhammapada; Yamakavagga, Verses 19-20.

6. Jatav, D.R; *Buddism in modern world*, 2007, p. 72.

great world force which prevails all through the world. The Buddha desired the welfare of all beings.

The destructive view in man is anger which governs us and destroys peace in the society. This can be subdued through the practice of *metta*. “This can be developed by nurturing sincere efforts and wishes for the welfare and happiness of all living beings without exception”.⁷ This discards hateful thoughts towards others, because, “hatred does not cease through hatred, through lone alone it ceases.”⁸ Followers of *metta bhavana* neither harm others nor disparage or condemn others. They do not have any fear nor do they make others fear. *Metta* is above personal affection (*Prema*) which causes both fear and grief. It relieves egoistic feelings and transcends all forms of separatism. Followers of *metta bhavana* do not remain under the influence of caste and creed, racial, religious or any other prejudices. If the *metta bhavana* is practised on a wide scale, it will definitely help in the establishment of sustainable society.

‘*Karuna*’, the second in the scheme of Brahma-Viharas, signifies the cultivation of a feeling of universal compassion for all creatures. Only a passive compassionate feeling is not all that is expected of a Buddha-disciple. He should be actively engaged in translating his feeling into action and cannot rest content till he has succoured the suffering creatures. “Cruelty is a vice or evil which is responsible for many errors and atrocities perpetrated in the world. This can be removed by cultivating *Karuna*. Its chief characteristic is to remove the woes of others.”⁹ It teaches us to serve others for removing their sufferings with altruistic motive without any reservation. Such a condition is congenial for peace in the society. This develops a co-operative attitude and mutual trust. It also provide a ground to resolve all the conflicts.

‘*Mudita*’ the third Brahma-vihar, is an important moral category which consists in the practice to have a feeling of joy at the happiness of others, including enemies. It means a moral action in the interest of mankind. “Jealousy is a social evil, which results

7. Vishudhimaggo, 1-93.

8. Dhammapada- Verse-5.

9. Vishudhimaggo, 1-94.

in reckless competitions and even wicked actions to show down a prosperous society and state. “The practice of *mudita-bhavana* helps in subduing this vice.”¹⁰ It teaches one to feel happy and liberal in other’s prosperity. Thus it embraces all prosperous beings and in the congratulatory attitude of a person. The practice of *metta* and *Karuna* is easier than the practice of *mudita*, which demands great personal effort and strong will-power

By the practice of the fourth *Brahma-Vihara*, ‘*Upekkha*’ the feeling of equanimity is generated and the Buddha-disciple does not get fascinated with the evanescent world. In the Buddhist literature there are hundreds of examples of extravagance of compassion towards the toiling sufferers. By his teaching *Upeksha* is the sublime state where there is no distinction between, rich and poor, low and high. The virtue of equanimity has also enshrines in the teaching of *Bhagvadgita*, which is known as ‘*Samattava-Bhava*’ and is a distinguish and essential quality of the person who is the aspirant of the salvation”.¹¹ Lord Buddha in *Dhammapada* says, “retaliate not, be silent as a cracked gong which you are abused by others. If you do so, I deem that you have already attained *Nibbana*, although you have not be realised *Nibbana*”.¹² Such high attributes have been given to *Upekkha*. It’s followers discard desirable clinging and aversion or possess the same attitude for both good and bad, evil-doers and good-doers, etc. Such condition completely neutralises and resolve all the conflicts.

Having a close observation, we find that the concept of the ‘*Brahma Vihara*’ displays the method of training the emotional aspect. **Karuna** (*Compassion*) is directed towards afflicted beings; it is the opposite of cruelty. **Mudita** (*Sympathetic Joy*) is the joy to be experienced when one sees a person who has some reason to be happy; it is the opposite of envy and Jealousy. **Metta** (*Maitri*) loving kindness is wishing well to all beings; it is the opposite of ill will. **Upekha** (*Equanimity*) is practised towards all beings and all formations; it is the opposite of bias and partiality.¹³ Thus the

10. *Ibid*, 1- 95.

11. *Srimadbhagavadgita*; Chapter II, Verses 32 to 47.

12. *Dhammapada*- Verse-133-134.

13. *Dhamma*, Volume 9, No. 8, 1985, p. 27.

true practice of all these sublime states collectively known as four Brahma-Viharas, makes a good ground for the establishment of sustainable societies.

“The most important Buddhist approach to the sustainable society in the concept of Bodhisattava, which means, suppose, “I am the person who practices Dhamma, I will be the last person who gets ride of this wheel of Birth and Death”¹⁴ This type of social welfare no one can find out in any system of religious thought. This idea itself is connected with universal composition. Buddhist ideal of ‘Bodhisattava’ is an excellent example of social responsibilities and duty consciousness. It tells us that to work for one’s own liberation is not enough rather one should take care of the other members of the society and work for the welfare of whole mankind. “The vow that Mahayanist is expected to take is to achieve the state of enlightenment, Bodhisattva (the wisdom-state of existence) not to live aloof from the world but to work with perfect wisdom and love among the multitudes of suffering beings for removing their misery and achieving their salvation”¹⁵

Buddhist ethical motto is, ‘Bahujan Hitaya and Bahujan Sukhaya’, which is undoubtedly required for the establishment of sustainable societies. Buddhism is dedicated towards peace, peace among all creatures, and ultimately, peace in the world. It stands for ‘Bahujanhitaya-bahujanasukhaya (for the good of many and for the happiness of many”¹⁶ The Buddhist ideal is not to concentrate on the welfare of oneself, rather to serve for the welfare of all. Even after the achievement of the final goal, the Buddha forbade his followers to get satiated and asked them to strive for the well-being of the fellow creatures. In the words of D.T. Swzuki, “one who has attend this ideal of Enlightenment and works for the salvation of other beings is also called a Bodhisattava. Love and wisdom (*Karuna and Prajna*) constitute the essence of his existence”¹⁷ Speaking about such perfect persons Nagarjuna says in the ‘Bodhicitta’ Thus the essential nature of all Bodhisattvas is a great loving heart

14. Jatav, D.R.; *Buddism in modern world*, 2007, p. 58.

15. Chatterjee, S.C and Dutta, D.M; *An introduction to Indian philosophy*, 1960, p. 156-157.

16. C.F. Mahavagga.

17. Swzuki, D.T.; *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*, p. 296.

(*mahakaruna citta*) and all sentient beings constitute the object of its love”¹⁸..... Therefore all Bodhisattavas, in order to emancipate sentient beings from misery, are inspired themselves in the filth of birth and death. Though thus they make themselves subject to the laws of birth and death, their hearts are free from sins and attachments. They are like unto those immaculate, undefiled lotus flowers which grow out of mire, yet are not contaminated by it.¹⁹ By an exchange (*Parivarta*) of the fruits of action, a Bodhisattva relieves the miseries due to others with his own good deeds and suffers the consequences of their action himself.

The aim of Buddha’s ‘Dhamma’ was to liberate human beings from worldly sufferings and the cycle of birth and death. The centre of Buddha’s Dhamma is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth. According to him this was his first postulate and the second was that man are living in sufferings, in misery and poverty. “The world is full of suffering and that how to remove this suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma. Nothing else is Dhamma”.²⁰ In Buddhism there was nothing higher and nobler than man. The Buddhist philosophy was concerned with ‘The liberation of man from *Dukha*, suffering”.²¹ It did not believe in the cast system or in the supremacy of the priestly class. “It treated all man as equals recognising the dignity of man as man, “No caste, no inequality no superiority; all are equal, was the slogan of Buddha’s religion”.²²

Buddhism has always proceeded and continues to proceed from the recognition of the fact that man represents the highest value in the world. Man is the centre of all Buddhist thought and practice. Humane interest is supreme in Buddhism. ‘Dhamma’ connotes a right ordering in human relations and in fact’s. Dhamma; as “Dr. Ambedkar wrote is righteousness which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life”.²³ Further, “morality is the essence of Dhamma. Morality in Dhamma arises from the direct necessity

18. *Ibid*, p. 292.

19. *Ibid*, p. 293-294.

20. Ambedkar, B.R; *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, PES (Bombay) 1957, p. 121.

21. Damodaran, K; *Man and Society in Indian Philosophy*, PPH (New Delhi), 1970, p. 31.

22. Ambedkar, B.R; *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, PES (Bombay) 1957, P-301.

23. *Ibid*, P-316.

for man to love man. It is for his own good that man has to love man.”²⁴ Dhamma also consists of Prajna and Karuna. Prajna is right understanding and Karuna means love. “The Buddha made prajna one of the two corner-stones of his Dhamma, because he did not wish to leave any room for superstition...Because, without it (Karuna) society can neither live nor grow, that is why the Buddha made it the second corner-stones of His Dhamma...A unique amalgam of prajna and Karuna (Understanding and love) is the Dhamma of the Buddha.”²⁵ The main feature of Buddha’s Dhamma is its ‘all embracing love,’²⁶ the essence of any humanistic theory.

As it is evident that Buddhist quest for sustainable societies is a **duty based phenomenon**, in which each and every individual has to share social responsibilities of his/her own in his/her full capacities. Reverence for duty and duty-consciousness is a well-known ethical concept which play an important role in the betterment of society. Famous German philosopher ‘Immanuel Kant’ has also discussed the concept of Duty, Duty-consciousness and reverence for Duty as the supreme moral principle.²⁷ “The essence of Srimad Bhagvad Gita is also lies in the performance of duties according to one’s own varna and Dharma. It also emphasises the performance of duty for the duty sake only not for the consequences of the actions.”²⁸

The Buddhist social ethics for layman prescribes duties which are set out in an orderly way six sets of reciprocal role expectations or duties are enumerated; those between parents and children; between pupils and teachers; husband and wife; friends and companions; master and servants; and finally, householders and members of **The Bhikkhu Sangha**. Their relations and duties are based on the kindly spirit of fellow-felling, the noble spirit of Justice, and the moral spirit of human cooperation. In the ‘Singalovada-Suttanta’ it is taught that householder, that is the laymen should avoid the fourteen evil things so as to succeed both in this world and in the

24. *Ibid*, p. 323.

25. *Ibid*, p. 317.

26. Jatav, D.R.; *The Buddha and Karl Marx*, 1968, P-185.

27. Kant, Immanuel; *Ground work of Metaphysics of morals*, Chapter I.

28. *Srimadbhagavadgita*; Chapter II, Verses 32 to 47.

next.²⁹ And it is also taught what and how he should behave towards his seniors, friends and juniors, “the basic idea of duty is ‘should minister to and love’ we may regard that the human relationship in which people mutually do service and love each other”.³⁰

It is evident from the above description that in the process of Eight fold path, the Buddha has stressed upon the formation of a strong but pleasant personality and a formidably noble character. In this respect an objection is raised by several thinkers and critics that the path promulgated by the Buddha is primarily to lead a Buddhist in his supreme quest for the attainment of Nirvana not for the sake of the establishment of sustainable societies. No doubt it is true, but it can be proved easily that the eight concepts forming the path are also of great sociological importance. The ethics or morality preached through this is action oriented and dynamic. The ultimate end of life no doubt is the liberation which means cessation from sufferings but it never allowed a person to forgo his/her social responsibilities and duties.

Significantly, the Buddha was not interested in metaphysics but addressed himself to the questions of ethics. This nature of his analytical frame of reference explicated his direct concern for the material world and the human problems. Buddhism with its close connection with the material world right from its inception accords almost centrality to worldly issues in its precepts its and perceptions. Thus, despite his preoccupation with the quest for emancipation, the Buddha was deeply interested in human welfare and indeed has postulated the doctrines indeed has postulated the doctrines applicable to and profitable for social affairs of mankind. Instead of wasting time and mental capabilities in obtuse and socially irrelevant issues, the Buddha confined himself to the task of the concretisation of perfect social norms and the articulations of humanistic concern.

The ideological formulation of the Buddha obviously did not exclude life from its contextual social and economic moorings. He looked at human life in its totality, a point that emerges with

29. *Singlovada-Suttanata*, Nos. 3-26.

30. Jata, D.R.; *Buddhism in modern world*, 2007, p. 68.

penchant clarity from numerous of his discourses. The aim of 'Buddha's Dhamma' was to liberate the suffering mankind , even then it lays stress on social and worldly life. It never advocates negligence towards social responsibilities and duties. Rather, it always persuades human beings to follow the right path and inculcate human values and virtues in themselves. We have to cultivate Amity, loving friendship, compassion, service to fellowmen and such other qualities and sentiments, which have been so convincingly explained by the Buddha. "Following the 'Right conduct' and 'Prajna', 'Sila' and 'Samadhi', one can easily get not only cessation from sufferings but also the highest end of life. The Buddhist way of life laid the whole emphasis on social morality and spiritual discipline.³¹ The basis of the Buddhist concept of sustainable society is inherent in the nature of Buddha's metaphysical teaching and ethical insight which one may practically find in the life of the Sangha.

31. Kabir, H; *Indian Heritage, Asia* (Bombay) 1962, p. 58.