

SOCIAL COHESION AND THE ARIYAPARYESANĀ SUTTA

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ABSTRACT

The eight goals for world development in the new millennium, adopted by the UN in 2000, have one theme in common. That is the theme of social cohesion (on a global scale). An economic system that can allow people of all backgrounds and nationalities to live a relatively prosperous and happy life is clearly essential. Unfortunately, the economic system that prevails today is founded on the notion of competition, the idea that a competitive attitude-between individuals, groups and nations-is basic to the success of an economy. Adam Smith developed the notion of the 'free market economy' in 1776 when he argued that the individuals that constitute a society manage to produce the goods and services they require simply by acting in their own self interest. An economy functions better, in other words, if everyone is selfish. The belief behind adherents of this economic philosophy is that people will work harder if they are working simply to satisfy their own needs and that a true communal spirit is impossible to achieve. It is clear that such an attitude encourages people to make their lives into a quest for the acquisition of wealth and power. This is an attitude that the Buddha Sakyamuni firmly rejected.

In the Pariyesanā Sutta there are two kinds of quest; the noble quest and the ignoble quest (ariyā ca pariyesanā, anariyā ca pariyesanā). The Pali term pariyesanā can be translated as a 'search', a 'quest' or an 'inquiry'. The Buddha realized while he was still young that he was not interested in a quest that generates only power and wealth. He saw

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the endless circle of birth, decay and death, connected empathically with the suffering of others, and dedicated his life to relieving that suffering. His quest was to discover the right kind of education that could lead to happiness and a sustainable lifestyle for everyone. That is why, in the SigalakaSutta, the Buddha teaches the Saṅgha-vatthus, the 'four foundations of social unity'. These are: generosity and donation (dāna), sympathetic communication (peyyavajja), acts that produce benefit (atthacariyā) and social equality (samānattatā). It is clear that a spirit of generosity could tackle the global problem of hunger. It should also be clear that clear and honest communication (peyyavajja), particularly by those in power, can create clarity rather than confusion; this is how 'right speaking' (sammaditthi) functions in the eight-fold path. A life of usefulness (atthacariyā) and social equality (samānattatā) complete the Buddha's recipe for social unity which is more vital than ever in today's troubled global situation.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a shop in the northern beach suburbs of Sydney called 'Samsara'. The shop sells luxury goods, particularly goods that carry fashionable labels. The name of the shop is carefully chosen; it informs the potential customer that what is on sale here is a collection of objects considered desirable according to global society's present value system. The word Samsara is usually interpreted as representing entirely negative values in Buddhism; it signifies all that should be avoided in order to achieve equanimity and tranquillity. From the perspective of modern global economics however the sale and acquisition of luxury items has a thoroughly positive connotation. Luxury goods carry social status and are thus highly desirable in the global market place. A mythology has grown up around certain objects, bestowing upon them a surplus semantic value. Each object carries references to the value system that constructed it, and which it helps to construct in turn. The foundational ideology behind this urban mythology is that to consume more than one needs is to strengthen the economy.

Of course there are times when Buddhists do go shopping. Everyone has to shop for necessities, and alms would not be offered to monks if Buddhists did not shop. However, the discourses of the

Buddha reveal a social philosophy far removed from this fascination with luxury and status. It appears that the modern global economy, with its emphasis on private ownership, is in opposition to the basic message of Buddhism. Where Buddhism encourages us to be generous and to promote social equality, the modern global economy encourages us to be selfish and to seek greater social status than those around us. Although the *Tipitaka* reveals that the Buddha had no interest in politics, certain of the discourses—such as the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta*—make clear references to social cohesion.

The “eight goals for world development”, adopted by the UN in 2000, have one theme in common and that is this issue of social cohesion. The theme is implicitly implicated in the eight millennium goals. To ease the burdens of poverty, hunger and disease, and the educational, gender and economic inequalities that often support them, it is clearly necessary to improve our means of producing social cohesion and ensuring equality. The Buddha recommended a system of social cohesion based on compassion and equality while certain dominant economic systems depend on competition and inequality. While it would be unrealistic to imagine a world free of consumerism and the pursuit of profit, it is surely reasonable to seek a solution to these global problems through a change of emphasis on the things we seek.

It is clear that a system is necessary that allows all people to live together in harmony. Many such systems have been established, some more successful and equitable than others. The Buddha taught an art of living based on selflessness. The ‘samsara’ of modern economic materialism, on the other hand, emphasises the ‘natural’ inequality between owners and workers. Its philosophy is based on the thoughts of Adam Smith who constructed an economic system based on selfishness. Smith’s system assumes that humans can be no better than they are right now, that they possess a basic human nature that they cannot rise above or go beyond. The Buddha’s teachings, on the other hand, are full of inspirational stories of humans that *have* risen above their conditioned ‘nature’.

2. THE NOBLE QUEST

In the *Ariyapariyesanā Sutta* the Buddha talks about two kinds

of search or quest that a person can embark upon for the course of his or her lifetime. There is a noble search and an ignoble search. The ignoble search is for all the things that are subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement. These things are the objects of attachment.¹ If, on the other hand, the person chooses the noble quest, he or she seeks the “deathless supreme security from bondage, Nibbāna”.² This phrase “the deathless supreme security from bondage” is repeated for each of the objects of attachment, for birth, ageing, sickness, death sorrow and defilement. The phrase is a description of Nibbāna from the point of view of the meditation practitioner. It says that the ultimate experience of meditation is one in which the practitioner feels secure, ‘free from bondage’ and utterly unconcerned with death. It is a way of describing Nibbāna that is useful in terms of the experiential and phenomenological language of contemplative practices. The notion of the ‘deathless’, in particular, is important as a description of the psycho-physical state to be attained during meditation practice. This is demonstrated in the Thai and Khmer meditation manuals unearthed in recent years that employ analogies and metaphors to describe that which cannot be described in less poetic language.³

There are therefore two ‘paths’ between which each individual must choose. One is a path that leads to success in Samsara; to social power, to adopting the symbolic language of the status symbol and to satisfying more than the individual needs. The other is the path taken by the Buddha; to face the deeply rooted needs and desires, to dissolve attachments and to ‘go forth’ into tranquillity. The statues rescued from Gandhāra and the Jataka stories of the Buddha emphasise this point of *Ariyapariyesanā*, the noble quest. The Buddha left a secure and privileged background to pursue a radically different form of security. It was a security based on a realization about the causes of suffering and the quest that must be undertaken to be free of attachment to those causes. It involved a

1. BhikkhuÑānamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, pp.254-256 (MN, I.162-164).

2. Ibid, p.256: *amatam anuttaram yogakkhemam nibbanam pariyesati* (*amatam* = eternal; *anuttaram* = incomparable; *yogakkhemam* = security; *pariyesati* = to seek for).

3. See for example François Bizot, 1976, *Le Figuier a Cinq Branches: Recherche sur le Bouddhisme Khmer, L'Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient*.

radical change of perspective and a commitment to certain tactics and strategies for changing the 'nature' of the individual. That is, where the nature of the individual is taken as constituting his or her needs and desires.

3. THE QUEST FOR SELF-SATISFACTION

This is in stark contrast to the viewpoint of the modern, global, free-market economy. A major patriarch of this movement was the Scottish philosopher and economist Adam Smith. Margaret Thatcher is said to have kept a copy of his book 'The Wealth of Nations' in her handbag. It is implicit in Smith's arguments that human nature cannot change. If our nature is identified with our needs and desires, then the logical way to create social cohesion is to seek the most efficient means of satisfying those desires. His economic philosophy, therefore, is based on self-interest. The division of labour creates a situation in which workers and stockholders are in competition and thus a system of economic values emerges. That is, each object or phenomenon appearing in the social environment has a certain value placed on it. A signifying system is constructed within which a vast array of economic and mythological values ebb and flow according to the fashionable ideologies of the time.

What are the common wages of labour, depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little, as possible. The former are disposed to combine in order to raise, the latter in order to lower, the wages of labour.⁴

Each works in his or her own self interest, and each value emerges according to this 'natural' balance between competitors. If human nature is unchangeable then the most logical way for people to live together cohesively is by recognising this fact and founding a system of values based on this empirical reality of human desire. The baseness of the human character is acknowledged and a system

4. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Classics, p.60.

allowed to emerge that reaches a ‘natural’ balance between the competing interests. The Buddhist attitude to social cohesion is quite the opposite. It *does* recognize the ability of humans to change, and it *is* founded on the ability of humans to make better choices— to follow paths that lead to more than satisfaction of basic instinct.

Alain de Botton sees the global fascination with wealth and success as ‘status anxiety’.⁵

It is common to describe people who hold important positions in society as ‘somebodies’ and their inverse as ‘nobodies’ - nonsensical terms, for we are all by necessity individuals with identities and comparable claims on existence... Those without status remain unseen, they are treated brusquely ...⁶

Botton quotes Adam Smith; “to feel that we are taken no notice of necessarily disappoints the most ardent desires of human nature”.⁷ Our human nature, according to this view, is to feel important, and this is at the very root of status anxiety. It is a particular notion of human nature that Buddhism reveals to be conditioned, obsessive and deluded. The environment that western children are born into conditions them to believe that they are worthless if they do not become powerful or important. The markers of self-esteem promoted by popular culture create a false sense of identity which is chained to the fashionable objects of attachment constructed in the global media. A vivid image from feminist theory is that of the ‘imaginary body’,⁸ the body that (western) women are obliged to convert themselves into. Constructed by socio-political structures, and all the qualities and values received from the signifiers of the global marketplace, it is the completely fashionable body, possessing “particular kinds of needs and desires”.⁹ A quest is taking place here but it is not freely chosen. Socio-economic signifiers exert a pressure that draws seekers toward the imaginary body like moths to a flame.

5. Alain de Botton, 2004, *Status Anxiety*, Penguin London.

6. *Ibid*, p.12.

7. *Ibid*, p.13.

8. Moira Gatens, 1996, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality*, Routledge, London.

9. Michel Foucault, quoted in Moira Gatens, 1996, *Imaginary Bodies*, p.52

The Buddha lists the subjects of the ignoble search in the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta:

Wife and children are subject to birth, men and women slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses and mares, gold and silver are subject to birth. These acquisitions are subject to birth; and one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them, and utterly committed to them, being himself subject to birth, seeks what is also subject to birth.¹⁰

Although wives and children are no longer considered possessions, the rest of the list clearly consists of the objects of attachment and desire that constitute the status of the accomplished citizen. The *sutta* confirms that the Buddha was talking about tangible possessions when he warned of the dangers of attachment. Many other aspects of life can be subjects of over-attachment but the tangible is significant in the construction of identity. As stated above, each subject is applied to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement. That is, each of the possessions is subject to birth, ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilement and the individual is constructed in particular ways through attachment to it. The person is subsequently affected intensely through intimate relations with the experience. One who chooses the noble path, however, will achieve unborn, unageing, unailing, deathless, sorrowless and undefiled security from that attachment. Rather than constantly succumbing to the pressures of desire and suffering status anxiety and the fear of loss, the path of Dhamma is followed into the realm of inner tranquillity where the seductive symbols of status and materialism have no dominion.

4. IN SEARCH OF SOCIAL COHESION

The Pali noun *pariyesanā*, as was discussed above, involves the notion of a quest or a search. It appears also in this *sutta* in its third-person verbal form as *pariyesati* 'he/she seeks' (that which is subject to death etc.). Therefore the quest is an active one-in the present moment-that actively moves toward its goal. The individual is on a

10. Bhikkhu Nāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, p.254.

quest to find something, whether it be the 'noble' goal of interacting with others through compassion and equality or the 'ignoble' goal of acquisition by means of contention and dissention. In this *sutta*, the person has a deep inclination to move toward the goal. One who follows the Dhamma has a deep inclination to stay on the path that leads away from attachment and longing, while one who shops at Samsara follows an equally deep commitment to satisfy desire.

Another *sutta* that discusses the notion of social cohesion is the SigālakaSutta where advice is offered to the laity on interpersonal relations. Instructions are first given to children on how to respect their parents and to husbands and wives on mutual respect within the marriage contract. But then he turns his attention toward the *ariyaka*, the leader, and the discourse takes a markedly socio-economic turn. The basic attitude recommended to the employer is one of compassion and fairness:

There are five ways in which a master should minister to his servants and workpeople as the nadir: by arranging their work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by looking after them when they are ill, by sharing special delicacies with them, and by letting them off work at the right time.¹¹

Workers are instructed to respond in kind: they should do their work properly, be supportive of the employer's reputation and be conscientious. A reciprocal approach to management is established, an approach that recognises the reasonable desire-and right-of workers to share in the prosperity of the organisation. It is the doctrine of the *Saṅgaha-vatthus*, which is usually referred to in English as the 'four foundations of social unity'.¹² The expression is made up of two Pali terms. The first is *Saṅgaha* which invokes the concepts of conjunction, compilation and assemblage.¹³ It thus expresses the notion of coexistence and, subsequently, of living together in peace or social cohesion. The second is *Vatthu* which signifies the multiplicity of matters, causes or substances out of

11. SigālovādaSutta, (SigālakaSutta), DN31, Verse 32, in BhikkhuÑāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.

12. SigālovādaSutta, DN 31, Verse 3.

13. R.C.Children, 2005, A Dictionary of the Pali Language, MunshiramManoharlal, New Delhi, p.446.

which such cohesion can emerge.¹⁴ The *Saṅgha-vatthus* form a conjunction, then, of the principal aspects of social cohesion, of the fundamental qualities that must be present for a cultivated society to thrive. The four *Saṅgha-vatthūni* are:¹⁵ *Dāna*, *peyyavajja*, *atthacariyā* and *samānattatā*, or “liberality, kindly speech, a life of usefulness and equality/impartiality in justice”.

a) *Dāna* signifies generosity and liberality as well as the spirit of ‘giving’, and the offering of donations.¹⁶ With this general semantic foundation it engenders social cohesion as it passes into the socio-economic domain wherein citizens become stakeholders in the society by investing in it. This is still a rather materialistic interpretation however as the notion of *dāna* passes far beyond issues such as rights and obligations. The Buddha taught that true social cohesion depends on people sincerely embracing the spirit of generosity, emphasising that generosity brings happiness and well-being to the giver as well as the receiver. The generous person benefits by ‘letting go’ of possessions and the objects of attachment. Grasping leads to suffering and can only be alleviated by committing to the noble quest for that which lies beyond attachment to material possessions.

b) The second aspect of social unity is *peyyavajja*, the nominal form of *piyavāḍi* which means ‘speaking kindly’ or being affable. ‘*Piyo*’ means to be kind and loving while *vāḍi* comes from *vadati* which means to speak, to say and to declare. It therefore refers to all speech acts, the social activities that we perform by means of the words that we utter in public. The acts that are carried out through our speaking can have a major effect on the people we meet. Kindly and honest speech creates peace and good will. An atmosphere of truth and reality emerges from the discourse rather than one of delusion and frustration. It is closely connected to the doctrine of *sammaditthi*, ‘right speech’, and generates clarity through compassionate means of communication.

c) The third aspect is *atthacariyā*, which signifies the production

14. Ibid, p.558.

15. T.W.Rhys Davids and William Stede, Pali-English Dictionary, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1993, p.666.

16. R.C.Childers, 2005, A Dictionary of the Pali Language, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, p.111.

of wise acts, acts that produce benefit' and 'useful conduct'.¹⁷ Speech acts are the consequences that our utterances produce in the social environment but these are the physical actions of our daily lives that affect others in a direct and concrete fashion. The noble quest again draws on the doctrine of the Eight-Fold Path by this time referring to (*sammaajjiva*), (right employment) and rejecting those professions that cause harm to others. Again the Buddha's attitude to social unity is confirmed as founded on compassion as we choose occupations that contribute to the smooth running of our community and to the happiness of those around us. Day after day we construct the world around us, transforming our environment by 'bringing forth a world'. Modern neuroscience has called into question the notion that the world is "out there", somehow "independent of our cognition", and that consciousness is just a "re-presentation of that independent world."¹⁸ Human cognition is so constituted that it constantly recreates its world. It is not necessary to assume with Adam Smith that human nature is a self-absorbed obsession with self aggrandisement and that we are trapped within this nature. The Dhamma teaches that better potentialities lie within and that we can release those potentialities.

d) A literal translation of the term *Samānattatā*, the fourth ingredient of social cohesion, reveals the interesting concept of 'being equal in terms of self-hood'. The Pali notion of *attā* is a difficult and often challenged concept in Buddhist scholarship. Particular interpretations of the term and its associated ambiguities spring up from all parts of the Buddhist world. However it is generally agreed that no true 'self' exists in any kind of permanent state or as an independent unit. This raises questions of identity, how we might be deluded by false notions of ourselves and how the self recreates itself through aspiration and desire. These socio-political references are seldom addressed directly in the Buddha's teachings, but they are implicit nevertheless. It is clear that self-interest is that which the Buddha sought to avoid and that social unity is endangered by self-absorption and over-attachment to personal desires.

17. Alwis, in Childers, p.66: Rhys Davids and William Stede, p.24.

18. Francisco J.Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, 1993, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, MIT Press, Cambridge, p.85.

5. CONCLUSION

We can achieve the UN Millenium goals of eradicating hunger, AIDS and child mortality, and we can bring about environmental sustainability, by adopting the quest for global equality, fairness and the greater good (*ariyapariyesanā*). They will not be achieved through policies that encourage a form of economics based on corporate hegemony and personal ambition (*anariyapariyesanā*). True social cohesion can be established by means of a compassionate and altruistic attitude to others and to the environment. The necessary changes, according to the Buddha's discourses, can be achieved within four main areas of social activity. They are: participation in the construction and maintenance of the economy, clear and honest communication with others, working together with others to produce social benefits and interacting with others in an environment of legal and social equality. We can improve the conditions of the globally disadvantaged by transforming the objects we seek (*pariyesanā*), by 'bringing forth' a different world, one that is founded on generosity (*dāna*), honest and compassionate speech (*peyyavajja*), useful conduct (*atthacariyā*) and social equality (*atthacariyā*).
