

Humanism in Buddhism

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Humanism' is a much used word these days. In fact, the term has gained so much popularity in recent times that every theory and every institution now claims to have a humanistic outlook. It is thus said that no one, despite their vehement announcements of a humanistic approach, has ever made a conscious effort to clarify or understand the meaning of the term. Compounding the problem further is the confusion and apparent crisis that humanity is passing through at present. Man stands at the crossroads; ahead lie the hopes and aspirations of the 21st century and behind stare the failures of the past. Humanism, as per the Webster's New International Dictionary, is defined as, "A contemporary cult or belief calling itself religious but substituting faith in man for faith in God".¹ C. F. Potter² adds more to this definition and explains humanism as the faith in the supreme value of self-perfectibility of human personality. But, despite all the rhetoric, humanism cannot be defined through any single theory or hypothesis and it also does not dwell on new facts. Humanism broadly indicates a shifting of focus from supernaturalism to naturalism, from transcendental to the existing, from absolute reality to the living reality. Humanism is the term for those aspirations, activities and attainments through which natural man puts on "super-nature".

Humanism, *per se*, is not a new trend. Its roots can be traced to the philosophical traditions of India, China, Greece and Rome. The most effec-

tive expression of this hope can be found in Regveda, where man is described as the "Child of Immortality" (*Amritasya Putrah*). The Mahabharata contends that there is nothing superior to man. Service to man is service to God, it says. Buddhism, especially in its early stages, propagated a form of radical humanism. It emphasized that each man must seek his own truth and that there were no permanent divine orders to help one in this search. In India, many mediaeval saints like Kabir, Nanak and Tukaram became popular because they identified themselves with ordinary human beings. They distinguished themselves with their sympathy, their understanding of the needs and interests of the oppressed section of the society and their apparent addiction to certain deeper sympathies. These qualities added to their charisma and made everyone they touched follow them. On the other hand we have the Buddha who has now been made into a superior impersonal ideal, Jesus exalted to the position of the Son of God and Muhammed, the Messenger of Allah.

Times have changed since. In the twentieth century, the term humanism has acquired a wider dimension. Neo-humanism is a form of reaction against the mechanism and dehumanization resulting from the overconfidence instilled in man by science. It is these changed times which give humanism its new meaning. Humanism is now based on our understanding of man and his relation with the environment. Such a humanism is, by its sheer definition, unitary instead of being dualistic. Instead of being particularistic, it now incorporates man's continuity with rest of life and the rest of life with the rest of universe; humanism is now naturalistic instead of being supernaturalist affirming the unity of the spiritual and the material; it is global instead of divisive. Humanism, today, is a directional process and not static in terms of quality, diversity, quantity and unity. In its present form, humanism will have nothing to do with absolutes. Absolute truth, absolute morality, absolute perfection, absolute authority, are terms that find no place in modern humanism parlance which insists that we can find standards to which actions and aims can be properly related³. Humanism is now an attitude towards and an approach to man's life and values confined to his life here on earth. As such, it is characterized by interest in man, concern for man and faith in his reason and conscience to perceive truth and goodness. A typical humanist is a believer in the dignity of man and is averse to advocating man's dependence on God either for worldly gains or for spiritual upliftment and salvation. It can be safely said that humanism is the attitude which attaches primary importance to man and his faculties, affairs, temporal aspirations and well being.

Gautama, the Buddha who appeared in the 6th Century BC, is unique among the founders of religions in more ways than one. He did not claim

either to be the message-bearer of an omniscient God or the vehicle of a revealed scripture; nor did he claim to be an omniscient teacher whose word should be accepted as a matter of faith. Buddha was more inclined to look upon experience as both, the source and the touchstone of truth. His teachings reveal his humanistic attitude. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. Among the great religions of the world, Buddhism probably has a greater claim to be called humanistic. While the great Chinese thinkers, Lao-Tse and Confucius, have pronounced humanistic teachings, they were not averse to indulging in metaphysical teachings which the Buddha avoided. When he first ventured out of his palace, legend tells us that he met an old man and felt that he was subject to the frailties of old age, met a sick man and felt that he was liable to sickness, saw a corpse and realized that even he was a mortal, and then met an ascetic, wearing a peaceful countenance, one who had adopted the traditional way to seek the religious truth. The Buddha then resolved to gain freedom from old age, sickness and death by following the ascetic's example. The mendicant is believed to have uttered the following words to the Buddha:

*Nara-pungava janma-mrtyu bhitah
Sramanah pravrajitosmi moksa - hetoh.* ⁴

(I am Sraman, an ascetic, who in fear of birth and death
have left home life to gain liberation)

After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha preached his realization to all hoping to bring about a betterment in human welfare. Buddha's life was spent in concern for the sorrow of men and in helping heal their troubles with his message for the good of many (*Bahu-jana-hitaya*) based on compassion for humanity. Buddhism teaches us not to envy or hate the rich because of their wealth, not to despise the poor for they are what they are because of their deeds in previous life and have the chance in this life to change their destiny.

Humanistic ethics of Buddhism developed much better than the Indian moral principles and also spread all over Asia. It set forth an ideal of universal compassion as identical to universal Nirvana. In Buddhism, humanism is that attitude of mind which attaches primary importance to man and to his faculties, affairs, temporal aspirations and well being. Buddhism insists on the supreme importance of the performance, on the part of the spiritual aspirant, of sublime duties like benevolence towards all (*Maitri*), compassion for the distressed (*Karuna*), joy at the happiness of other's (*Mudita*), and indifference to the faults in other's (*Upeksha*). It has been rightly observed that "meditational practices constitute the very core of the Buddhist

approach to life....As prayer in Christianity, so meditation is here the very heartbeat of the religion."⁵ The Buddha's main motto was to free human beings from worldly sufferings. Buddha's enlightenment (*Bodhi*) or wisdom, the deliverance of which constitutes the famous Buddhist doctrine of Four Noble Truths (*Catvari aryasatyani*) and the Eight-fold Path. The Four Noble Truths expounded by the Buddha are simply stated as follows: There is suffering in life, there is a cause for suffering, there is a state or condition of absence of suffering and there is a way to that state of cessation of suffering. The way to the end of suffering is the Eight-fold Path and the state of release from suffering is *Nirvana*. The Eight-fold Path, according to Buddhism, comprises of right belief, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right endeavour, right mindfulness and right concentration. It is said that Buddhism is the complete civilization of man. The aim of Buddhist ethics is the regeneration of humanity.⁶ These teachings, propounded by Buddha were for the welfare of human beings which shows his humanistic attitude towards all living beings. Buddha's two-fold wisdom holds human existence as being meaningless when in isolation from an ideal of life to be realized and conceives this ideal negatively in terms of the concept of *Nirvana*. *Nirvana*, regarded as the ideal of human life, means the extinction of egoism or mere individuality along with inordinate craving (*Trsna*) which is the source of human suffering. The two schools of Buddhism, Hinayana and Mahayana, differ in the present context primarily because of their respective conceptions of individuals who have realized the ultimate significance of human existence or the ideal of human life. According to the former, such an individual is an *Arhat*, whereas in the latter's view, he has reached the state of *Bodhisattavahood*. It is in view of this that they insisted on the supreme importance of the performance of four sublime duties by the spiritual aspirant. These are precisely the duties which, according to *Mahayanists*, are incumbent upon every individual to perform so that the ideal of *Arhatship* gets transmuted into that of *Bodhisattavahood* and individual self-culture sublimated into universal liberation of mankind. This is how Buddhism envisages the possibility of universal ethics of humanity, which is just another name for humanism in the sense of the religion of universal liberation.

Buddhism has been a progressive movement of thought and self culture with the regulative principles of human conduct and the directive to the furtherance of the cause of humanity started from the enlightenment of a deeply meditative mind and the successful career of an earnest seeker of the truth and the way and that of a thinker and teacher.⁷ Just as Judaism is the earliest monotheistic religion, Buddhism is the earliest brand of humanism. Buddha brought into existence what he perhaps conceived to be a miniature model of a humanistic society in the shape of monastic order. This was

a model where all artificial or unnatural distinctions between men - such as distinction of caste - would disappear and wisdom and moral excellence would serve as a tie to bind individuals together into a common humanity. Buddha said:

*Just as, oh monk, the great rivers, the Ganga, Aciravati, Sarabhu and Mahi, when they fall into the ocean, lose their names and Gotras and are known as the ocean, even so do the four castes of Brahamans, Kshatriyas, Vasyas and Sudras, when they have gone forth in the doctrine and discipline taught by Tathagata from a house to a homeless life, lose their names and Gotras, and are known as ascetics, son of the Sakyas.*⁸

Buddha further removes the caste distinction by saying:

*One does not become a Brahamana by birth
One does not become an outcast by birth
One becomes a Brahamana by act
One becomes an outcast by act.*⁹

The followers of Buddha also work on the same line. Apart from the details of Ashoka's administrative reforms (which may be ascertained from any authoritative treatise of his practice of statecraft) his edicts concerning the constitutional checks against the crown and the charter of right for the citizen, offer eloquent testimony to his earnest attempt to build a society and a state in accordance with the principle of humanism. If a genuinely wholesome outlook on life was ever brought to bear upon the conduct of human affairs, it was done by Ashoka, who in turn was inspired by the teachings of Gautama, the Buddha. Buddhism is a constructive and peaceful channel for the welfare and happiness of the many (*Bahu-jana hitaya, bahujana Sukhaya*). The absolute enlightenment and compassion of Buddhist humanism, should the Buddhist Vedanta become the truth for human relationships and social action, have great possibilities for transformation among living beings. Prince Shokotu of Japan, who introduced Buddhism into his country, built a temple, a hospital, a dispensary and an asylum for insane persons. Japanese monasteries, in turn, built bridges and ferries and promoted medical aid. In Thailand and Vietnam, a large number of dispensaries and hospitals were built and there was widespread ministrations of sick by Buddhist monks. The prohm inscription of Jayavarman VII of Kambuja (1181-1200 AD), whose empire extended from Burma and Malaya to the border of China, mentions 102 hospitals staffed by physicians and nurses, in different parts of the kingdom. The spirit of nonviolence and non-injury to all sentient beings and universal compassion are the most precious gifts of Buddhism to the world.

Another aspect of Buddhism reflecting its humanistic outlook is the growth and spread of Buddhism in India and other countries of Asia through peaceful means. A singular feature of the spread of Buddhism has been the

fact that not a single drop of blood was shed in the name of Buddha's teachings. Though the Buddhists had been persecuted by anti-Buddhist votaries in India, China, Central Asia and other parts of the world, no Buddhist king or association is known to have resorted to war for the propagation of Buddhism.¹⁰ The Mahayana's humanist ethics developed the Indian moral principles further and spread these to the whole of Asia. It set forth the idea of universal compassion as being identical to universal Nirvana and the ethical imperative of the *Bodhisattava* who symbolizes the virtues of the layman - infinite solicitude and service for fellow man through the cycle of rebirths as long as all creatures as numerous as sands in the banks of the Ganga are not redeemed. Asanga, the Mahayanist poet-philosopher writes; the *Bodhisattava* lives for beings in the supreme marvel of the world, or rather, it is not since other and self are for him identical, since all beings are to him as himself. The text *Bodhisattvabhumi* remarks that the senses of the *Bodhisattavas* are keener and wider; he lives for his own well-being and for the well-being of infinite creatures of the universe; and his enlightenment has infinite scope. By not entering into his own salvation, and by continuing through infinite births to do good to creatures, he comes to possess all the virtues (*Paramitas*) - charity, good conduct, forgiveness, meditation and enlightenment. Another Mahayana text asserts, "My self, I will place in suchness and, for the sake of helping all the world. I will also place all beings in suchness; the immeasurable world of beings I will lead to universal *Nirvana*". Mahayana morality has been the perennial spring of a profound sense of tenderness for life, love, altruism and service for fellow-creatures in all Buddhist countries. This underlies the deep and spontaneous humanism and socialism. Buddhism has shown not only a marked spirit of socialism and humanitarian service for the have-nots but also forbearance, mutual accommodation and coexistence in several regimes and culture in Asia, not to speak of its remarkable organizational power. Certain ideas which are directly involved in the Buddhist doctrine of *Nirvana*, and certain others which are associated with it, may serve as the basis of the principal of conduct which may be held to constitute the way to liberation in its wholeness and entirety.

It is said that in all cultures and during all times, women have never been considered mere entities or totally ignored. Women have, however, never been accorded the same kind of universal respect as is conferred upon men. History also stands testimony to the fact that no matter how superior men are regarded, women have frequently challenged this conception and at times even won a more honoured standing, both, in life and in literature. According to I. B. Horner; "In the pre-Buddhist days, the status of women in India was on the whole low and without honour. During the Buddhist period, there was a change. Women came to enjoy more equality and greater respect and authority than even hitherto accorded to them." Horner gives

the credit for this change to the Buddha for he gave the *Dhamma* to both; he also gave talks to the householders and their wives. It was impossible, Horner argues, for the men, steeped as they were in the Buddhist teachings, not to respond to the constant proofs in daily life of the powers of women's devotion, self-sacrifice, courage and endurance that symbolizes a woman. Under Buddhism, more than ever before, a woman was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of the body and less of a chattel to be respected only when she lived for a man. The old complete dependence in which a woman's will never exerted itself and functioned only to obey was gradually vanishing.¹¹ Joshi mentioned that even according to Ambedkar, Buddha was an upholder of the doctrine of equality of sexes.¹² A. S. Attekar further adds that before 500 BC, the status of women in India was comparatively better than what it degenerated to in the following years.¹³ His views might be correct, but there is no denying that the position of Indian women became more prestigious with the introduction of Buddhism. They were allowed to enter the Order and had freedom of religion. P. Lakshmi Narasu also said, "Men and women were placed by the Buddha on the same footing of equality."¹⁴ It becomes clear that the Buddha's mission of tender compassion for all beings was set forth to establish the kingdom of righteousness, to give light to those entrenched in darkness and to open the gates of immortality to all."¹⁵ It is generally believed that the Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, a democrat and that his efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in Indian society.¹⁶ According to Ambedkar, "No caste, no inequality, no superiority; all are equal. That is what the Buddha stood for."¹⁷ Rhys David mentioned that; "Buddhism ignores completely and absolutely all advantages and disadvantages arising from birth, occupation or social status and sweeps away all barriers and disabilities arising from the arbitrary rules of mere ceremonial or social impurity."¹⁸

Buddhism assumed more serious proportions when it came forward as a religion without God and one that exemplified itself as the earliest forms of humanism in the religious history of the world. The evolution of Buddhism, however, conformed to the spirit of humanism only occasionally and not continuously or ceaselessly as it was expected to do. This was mainly due to two sets of cause - one internal to Buddhism itself and the other external. The former consists of at least three factors. One of these was Buddha's creation of the monastic which amounted to the official recognition of the division of society into classes - precisely a practice which Buddhism intended to do away with in the first place. This, went against Buddhism's spirit of humanism. The second was Buddha's dependence upon royal patronage for his missionary activities. This, too, was opposed to Buddhism's

humanistic outlook of life. Kings, after all, are embodiments of power, authority and privilege which should find place in the scheme of humanization of the individual and the society. Buddhism, which started in India, spelling the ruin of the cause of humanism, continued doing so in exile with the result that what was left of Buddhism is just its name, the original concepts lost long back. This is one of the tragedies of the historical process due to the folly of man himself which should have been avoided if the planet was to develop into the "best possible world". The Buddhist teacher Aryadeva summarizes the doctrine of lord Buddha only in one word, "non-violence".¹⁹ A compassionate and nonviolent sovereign of the world protects the people of the world and leads them to material prosperity and intellectual development. A *Chakravartin* does not use arms; he does not punish, he conquers the world not by force, but by the means of *Dharma* (righteousness) only. The four rules of Buddhist morality obligatory on all practitioners of the religion are:

- 1) One should not kill.
- 2) One should not steal.
- 3) One should not be sexually sinful.
- 4) One should not speak a lie.²⁰

The *Dharma* or word of the historical Buddha is contained in the canonical works of Buddhist sects. But, Buddha, the embodiment of great compassion and wisdom, is beyond the pale of sectarianism. He is the very essence of truth and goodness and the sublimity as contained in his teachings.²¹ A number of Buddhist communities observe many ethical rules to conquer temptation. Among these, the practice of chastity (*Brahmacharya*), non-possession (*Unupadana*) and nonviolence (*Ahimsa*) are the three main rules of Buddhist life. Buddhism has been a great force for peace in the world. The Buddha's policy of peace, self-sacrifice, kindness and charity finds an echo in the following lines from the *Mahabharata*:

*Akrodhena jayet krodham asadhun sadhuna jayet
jayet kadaryam danena jayet satyena canrtam.*²²

(One should conquer anger by cool-headedness, evil by good, miserliness by charity and falsehood by truth)

Buddhism promotes the same tenets thus:

*Akkodhena jine kodham asadum saduna jine I
jine kadariyam danena saccena alikavadinam II3II*

(*Dhammapada: Kodhabagga*)

In general, Buddhism refers to the teachings of Buddha but the actual *Buddha Dharma* is the inner realization which directly protects living beings from their sufferings. If we do not contemplate the nature of *Dharma*, then we will not understand the usefulness, capabilities, and function of

Dharma; and we will not be able to judge whether or not we need *Dharma*. It is Buddha *Dharma* which protects living beings from suffering, fear and danger. However, in order to become free from our own problems and sufferings, we need to exert great effort to achieve *Dharma*. Buddhas teachings are like medicine, Buddha is he doctor himself and community of Buddha's followers (monks/nuns), the nurses. We need their services if we wish to be freed from our sufferings.

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