

A Study of Unity in Buddhism



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ABSTRACT

Violence and conflict have plagued humankind from time immemorial. While the human has always stirred with the yearning for peace, harmony, and loving fellowship. When each new war, division, or dispute has peaked, the hope rises that reconciliation will follow, that peace and unity will eventually prevail. Over and over again, these hopes were quickly disappointed.

This problem must also have weighed on the Buddha's heart. The teaching of Buddhism offers a rational understanding of human suffering and also shows a path to diagnose human suffering (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2016).

In the Suttanipāta the Buddha gives voice to the feeling of vertigo such violence had produced in him, perhaps soon after he left Kapilavatthu and witnessed firsthand the world outside his native land:

“Fear has arisen from one who has taken up violence: behold the people engaged in strife. I will tell you of my sense of urgency, how I was stirred by a sense of urgency.”

“Having seen people trembling like fish in a brook with little water, when I saw them hostile to one another, fear came upon me.”

“The world was insubstantial all around; all the directions were in turmoil. Desiring an abode for myself, I did not see any place unoccupied.”
(Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2016)

The teachings of the Buddha reveal the step by step process of changing the state of mind for long lasting happiness. It makes the mind to become more positive and constructive so that the life experience becomes more satisfactory and helpful for others (P. Chaudhry, 2015).

Therefore, the teaching of Buddhism is based on compassion, non-violence and understanding of self and offers a moral code for all people irrespective of their gender, caste, religion, region, etc. Buddhism shows a way to reach a deeper insight into human nature and the reality of life through meditation. At last the entire humanity can gain the harmony of mind and unity in social life. It is important to seek the way for social development by understanding the principle of unity and ways to achieve unity.

Keywords: Violence, conflict, non-violence

A Study of Unity in Buddhism

The concept of unity: according to the definition, unity is the state of being undivided or joined as a whole. All Buddhists have faith in the Buddha, his teaching (Dhamma), and the religious community (Sangha). Moreover, based on the Lord Buddha's teachings, Buddhists believe that everything in life is united somehow and someway. Speaking about the concept of unity, G.W. Leibniz said, "many in body and one in mind." (Leibniz, 1965) This exposition is based on the Buddha teaching that "we are all different but share the same spirit (united)." (M. Hughes, 2013)

The concept of unity in Buddhism: Buddhism is a way of living. The teachings of Buddha about the noble truths and the moral code of conduct expounded by him are available for all human beings irrespective of their sex, caste, region and religion. It helps individuals to understand the true nature of human personality. It promotes understanding of self along with moral code of conduct that helps all individuals to generate respect for others, honesty and also help them to develop clear and strong mind power. Buddha realized that peace would come only when the person is happy. He wanted man to get rid of all malice, hatred, indulgence in lower desires and evil thoughts. He wanted to substitute these with good thoughts, worthy desires, feelings of generosity and compassion, and an attitude of serenity and composure. Let men purify their thoughts and desires and complete happiness will be theirs. Such a thought-effort will, then, lead to universal peace. As a social code, Buddhism leads us to peace, understanding and integration. Buddha tried to inculcate in his followers the sense of service and understanding with love and compassion by separating man from passion and elevating humanistic tendency in man with the help of morality, compassion (*karuna*) and concentration (*samatha*) (R.Saksana).

The Buddhist social ethics: Buddhism guides all people to change their way of life. It is special to human beings because they become good or bad based on their behavior. Harmony in any community, whether a small group or the whole society, depends on a shared commitment to ethical conduct (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2016). The Buddha made right view and right understanding the cornerstone of the Noble Eightfold Path — "the way leading to the cessation of suffering." The Buddha taught: "Right view is noble, taintless, supramundane, and factor of the path." The Dhamma is a standard of moral authority greater than the authority of any individual. It is the basis of ethical conduct, enabling the individual to be a positive force in the world (D.L. Phillips, 2014).

Faith in the Buddha's teaching leads to development of right intention among the individuals. It promotes a kind of ethical commitment towards one's own action. There are two important aspect of ethical commitment, right speech and right action. While right speech implies abstaining from telling lies and promotes friendly talk, warm and genteelly taking to others, right action means abstaining from taking such action which may harm or hurt others, and promotes thoughtfulness of one's action and compassion towards others. In Buddhist thought, *ahimsa* (non-violence) is also an important concept. The first precept of Buddhism is to avoid doing harm to other living things.

Ahimsa or Non-Violence: Buddhism is a gospel of peace and non-violence. Non-violence is a way of life devoid of all extremes of passion like anger, enmity, pleasure and pain. True peace emanates from non-violence which is a rational and mighty force. The practice of non-violence is life-affirming which contributes to human unity, progress and peace. Non-violence teaches one to live in harmony with others and with oneself. It requires adherence to high standards of truth and self-control.

The principle of *ahimsa* is based on an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life, extends to all living beings, covers any deliberate action of thought, word or deed, and involves avoiding deliberate harm and striving to bring about the greatest good. The other precepts apply this principle to specific areas of behavior, such as speech and sexual activity.

For Buddhists, the Five Precepts provide guidelines for leading an ethical life. The five precepts, or rules of training are:

- (1) I undertake the rule to abstain from taking life.
With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body.
- (2) I undertake the rule to abstain from taking what has not been given.
With open handed generosity I purify my body.
- (3) I undertake the rule to abstain from sexual misconduct.
With stillness, simplicity and contentment I purify my body.
- (4) I undertake the rule to abstain from false speech.
With truthful communication I purify my speech.
- (5) I undertake the rule to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind.
With mindfulness, clear and radiant, I purify my mind (Clear Vision, 2018).

The Four Brahma-Viharas: Buddhism is considered to be a practical religion of peace and non-violence. The Four Brahma-Viharas, or the four divine abodes, are friendliness, compassion, joy and equanimity, which when put into practice tend to promote global welfare (R. Saksana).

Compassion is an exercise of our courage to transcend the dualistic view of human relationships to one that is interdependent and interconnected, is an acknowledgement of shared humanity and of an ultimate equality of suffering of all human beings. It is a capacity to feel others' pain, sorrow, despair, or suffering as our own based on the clear awareness of interdependent origination of our existence. A compassionate mind inspires the development of true kindness, a universal and unselfish love that extends from ourselves to friends, family, and ultimately to all people, including those with whom we are in conflict. It drives us to take action, care for, and serve others (J. Tanabe, 2016).

The story of Angulimala is one of the most famous in the Buddhist Canon and one of the stories I believe that we can learn most from to apply to today's world. Angulimala became a serial murderer, killing innocent people and terrorizing many others. He chopped off their fingers and made them into a necklace and thus became known as "Angulimala". He was a criminal wanted by the state, a killer of 999 people. He was someone who was viewed as irredeemable evil, with no hope that he could become better. The Buddha refused to believe this and went to talk to Angulimala, even though he was warned by almost everyone not to do so. Angulimala saw the Buddha coming and ran towards him, waving a knife. However, no matter how fast he ran, and even though the Buddha was walking at his normal pace, Angulimala couldn't catch up to him. He eventually called out to the Buddha to stop.

"I have stopped Angulimala, you stop too," Buddha replied.

Angulimala asked how it was possible since the Buddha was still walking. Buddha famously replies:

"Angulimala, I have stopped forever, I abstain from violence towards living beings. But you have no restraint towards things that live. That is why I have stopped and you have not."

Angulimala relents and realising the error of his ways, he takes refuge in Buddha, and becomes a monk. He changed his name to “Ahimsaka” (non-violent one) to reflect his new identity and change of heart. Later, King Pasenadi looks for Angulimala, sees the Buddha and warns him about the serial killer. The Buddha then asks the king, what he would do if he saw that Angulimala had changed, and abandoned violence and become a monk, to which the king replies that he would be very pleased and even support Angulimala. The Buddha then shows him the newly named Ahimsaka to which the King, in shock, congratulates him and the Buddha saying:

“Venerable sir, we ourselves could not tame him with force and weapons, yet the Blessed One has tamed him without force and weapons.”

Although the story of Angulimala teaches us many things, its main point is that no one is inherently evil and that no one is beyond redemption. The Buddha challenges someone who practices extreme violence with non-violence and wins. As the King admits, his armies had not been able to beat Angulimala with violence but the Buddha had done it with compassion. As Indian Peace Activist Satish Kumar writes:

“The real challenge is to talk to those who are violent, those who disagree, and those who oppose and who intend to harm. External violence is only a symptom, a manifestation of some deeper cause. Only in dialogue can the perpetrators of violence and the victims of violence discover its root cause. And find ways to heal the discord.” (Buddha Weekly, 2018)

Sigālovāda-Sutta: In the search for general principles the Sigālovāda-Sutta, attributed to the Lord Buddha himself, can serve as a typical example of the Buddhist code of social ethics. The teachings in this sutta consist of:

1. The avoidance of the four vices of conduct (corresponding to the first four of the Five Percepts).
2. Doing no evil out of the four prejudices that are caused by love, hatred, delusion and fear.
3. Not following the six ways of squandering wealth, i.e. addiction to intoxicants, roaming the streets at unseemly hours, frequenting shows, indulgence in gambling, association with bad companions and the habit of idleness.

4. Knowledge of how to distinguish among the four false friends, viz., the out and out robber, the man who pays lip service, the flatterer, and the leader to destruction, and the four true friends, viz., the helper, the man who is the same in weal and woe, the good counselor, and the sympathizer.

5. The amassing of wealth and the fourfold division of money into one part for living and doing duties toward others. Two parts for business and one part for time of need.

6. The covering of the six quarters of human relationships and their attendant mutual responsibilities, i.e., child-parent, pupil-teacher, husband-wife, friend-friend, servants and workmen-master or employer, monk-layman.

7. The four bases of social harmony, viz., giving, kindly words, life of service, and impartial treatment and participation (P.A. Payutto).

Sāraṇīyadhamma: The study has found that the dhamma which states virtues for fraternal living or the state of conciliation is called “*Sāraṇīyadhamma*”. As stated in the Theravāda Buddhism, it supports harmony. The dhamma can be applied in daily life and will make people in the society live together more peaceful. It includes six dhammas which, when kept in one’s mind, bring mutual respect, sympathy or solidarity, non-quarrel, harmony, and unity. These six factors are:

1. Mettākāyakkamma: to be amiable in deed, openly and in private,
2. Mettāvācikkamma: to be amiable in word, openly and in private,
3. Mettāmanokamma: to be amiable in thought, openly and in private,
4. Sādhāraṇabhogitā: to share any lawful gains with virtuous fellows,
5. Sīlasāmaññatā: to keep without blemish the rules of conduct along with one’s fellows, openly and in private, and
6. Diṭṭhisāmaññatā: to be endowed with right views along with one’s fellows, openly and in private (Phra Brahmaganabhorn, 2014).

All these dhammas reflect the endearing and keeping others in mind. It can be seen that when monks are in unison, admiring each other and do not engage in quarrel they would look like water that can be mixed harmoniously with milk. There will be no dissension, threaten or expelling of others, which will result in gaining trust from those who are yet to have faith, whitest increase trust from those who already faith (Phrakhr Sirithanasan, 2015).

Conclusion

The study has found that the unity or harmony taught in the Theravāda Buddhism starts from being amiable in deed, in word and in thought towards friends and general fellows. Unity also means one should not consider oneself greater than others while should be respectful to them too. Unity will make people united and go along well which results in the completeness of action.

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