

Buddhist Approach to Human Society Development: Economic Ethics for a Ruler



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ABSTRACT

Buddhist already contributed for human development and social welfare form over two thousand five hundred years ago to present time. Especially, Buddhist teaching alleviated not only spiritual but also physical well-beings for human societies and all over the world. In Buddhism, material well-being is a necessary condition to support the cultivation of the mind. This implies that insufficient material well-being, or the problems associated with poverty, can cause suffering that may impede the practice of mental development. From the Buddhist perspective, the main objective of economic activities is to alleviate suffering. A righteous ruler rules the state in the name of justice, subordinate only to the dharma. The relationship between the ruler and dharma, or righteousness, is important in order to maintain proper social order, attain personal liberation, and forms a basis for the duties of the state. In Buddhism, the concept of “wealth” is related to ethic. Poverty is regarded as the problem in economic life. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to study Buddhist contribution to human society for economic ethics of a ruler in the Buddha Teachings, specially this study quote from *CakkavatthiSihanadasutta*, *Kutadantasutta*, *Aggannasutta*.

Keywords: Buddhist Contribution, Development, Economics, Ethics, Ruler

1. Introduction

In Buddhism, an enormous amount of ethics can be seen such as ethics for householder, ethics for monks, and ethics for rulers and so on. The five precepts (pancasila)¹ are considered as the Buddhist ethics platform for everyone. Nonetheless, these precepts are not easy to observe. The Buddha admonished five lay-disciples regarding observing the precepts that “You should not consider any individual precepts as being easy or unimportant. The observance of the precepts will lead to your weal and happiness. Do not think lightly of any of the precepts; none of them is easy to observe”.² The concept of weal is related to ethics in Buddhism, consequently. As far as the ethics for ruler is concerned, the Buddha discussed the importance and the prerequisites of a good government. He showed how the country could become corrupt, degenerate and unhappy when the head of the government becomes corrupt and unjust. He spoke against corruption and how a government should act based on humanitarian principles.

The Buddha once said:

“When the ruler of a country is just and good, the ministers become just and good, when the ministers are just and good, the higher officials become just and good, when the higher officials are just and good, the rank and file become just and good, when the rank and file become just and good, the people become just and good”.³

In the CakkavattiSihanada Sutta, the Buddha said that immorality and crime, such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, could arise from poverty. Kings and governments may try to suppress crime through punishment, but it is futile to eradicate crimes through force.⁴

Moreover, In the KutadantaSutta, the Buddha suggested economic development instead of force to reduce crime. The government should use the country’s resources to

¹i. panatiparaveramanisikkhapadamsamadiyami.
 ii. adinnadanaveramanisiakkhapadmsamadiyami.
 iii. kamesumicchacaraveramanisikkhapadamsamadiyami.
 iv. musavadaveramanisikkhapadamdiyami.
 v. suramerayamajjapamadatthanaveramainsikkhapadamsamadiyami.

²K. Sri, Dhammananda, “Dhammapada”, Malaysia, 1992. P 462

³J, III, p. 274, J.I, pp. 260-399

⁴D, III, pp. 58-79

improve the economic conditions of the country. It could embark on agricultural and rural development; provide financial support to those who undertake an enterprise and business provide adequate wages for workers to maintain a decent life with human dignity.⁵

We can note in passing why the Buddha's Teaching is called the Eternal Dhamma or Truth. From the points mentioned above we can see that the Teachings are universal and can be applied to all human societies no matter how separated they are in time and space. Therefore, The Buddha point out the moral principles for human societies and the moral applications of a ruler to support public power and provide for improvement of the welfare or happiness for the peoples.

2. The Problems of Poverty

In Buddhism, poverty (*daliddiyam*) is defined as a deficiency of basic commodities needed for maintaining physical well-being. A pauper is a person who is destitute, indigent, and in great need of four basic commodities; food, clothing, shelter, and medicine.⁶ A test of sufficiency is the minimum quantity of basic commodities that would provide an endurance and continuance of the physical body and also an end to physical discomfort.⁷ Without a sufficient amount of basic commodities, the individual is incapable of undertaking mental development activities- right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation which are necessary in realizing enlightenment.

Food is to be consumed just enough to survive and continue one's life physically as well as ending bodily afflictions. Sufficient clothing is only that amount which is needed to counteract the weather, heat or cold; protect one from undesirable contact with insects such as flies and mosquitoes; and to cover parts of the body that cause shame. Housing is required for protection from the inclement weather and for seclusion. Medicine is required for curing sickness, pains, and for maximum freedom from disease. Consumption of each basic good for purposes beyond these described is considered in excess of a sufficient amount. Not having enough basic commodities to avoid poverty causes two primary problems according to Buddhist teachings. The first problem is regarded as the root of bodily suffering. It is realized as hunger, sickness and short-life, which creates

⁵D, I, pp. 134-136

⁶Vin I 58, A vi 45

⁷M.53

an immense obstacle to the cultivation of the mind. The second problem is that poverty, which is also a cause for some unwholesome conduct, leads to many problems in society, such as immorality, conflicts and disharmony.

3. Poverty as a Cause of Suffering

The Buddha said that “woeful in the world is poverty and debt⁸ and “poverty is suffering in this world.” Here He speaks to the use of wealth by governments because poverty and want, like greed (to which they are closely related) contributes to crime and social discontent.⁹ Buddhism maintains that it is the duty of the government or the administrators of a country to see to the needs of those who are in want and to strive to banish poverty from the land. At the very least, honest work should be available to all people, trade and commerce should be encouraged, capital should be organized and industries monitored to guard against dishonest or exploitive practices. By this criterion, the absence of poverty is a better gauge of government’s success than the presence of millionaires. In Buddhism, poverty can cause suffering for those who enjoy sensual pleasures in two ways: bodily suffering and indebtedness.¹⁰

First, poverty causes bodily suffering primarily as it induces sickness brought on, for example by hunger, or exposure to unbearable weather conditions. The Buddha declared that hunger is the most severe of all illnesses because it is a hindrance to mental development and impedes the ability to practice along the Noble eightfold path. In the Dhammapada the Buddha stipulate as follows:

*JighacchaParamaroga, sankharaparamadukkha,
Etamnatvayathabhutam, nibbanamparamamsukham.*¹¹

⁸ A.III.352

⁹ D.III.65,70

¹⁰ A. VI.45. This implies that poverty is not mental suffering for those who renounces sensual pleasures. For example a monk or an ascetic who renounces sensual pleasures and prefers to live a simple life. Nevertheless, If poverty causes hunger or sickness which obstruct the practice of mental development. It is then a cause of bodily suffering.

¹¹ Dhp.203., K Sri dhammananda, “Dhammapada”, Malayasia, p-404

Hunger is the greatest disease¹². Aggregates are the greatest ill. Knowing this as it really is, (the wise realize) Nibbana bliss supreme.

Second, poverty is also suffering for an individual if it induces indebtedness. If a pauper, gets into debt, then this indebtedness may cause other types of suffering as well. For example, the inability and pressure to pay the interest when it is due induces harassment from creditors and possibly imprisonment.

Based on the Buddhist view of human life, the primary objective of economic activities is, therefore, to alleviate suffering that is caused by poverty. Economic activities that create wealth can lead to the elimination of some form of bodily suffering, such as hunger and sickness.¹³ They can also eliminate indebtedness that is induced by poverty. By contrast, possessing wealth only cannot alleviate suffering caused by indebtedness without reducing the desire for unnecessary goods and or services beyond one's income. Rather, an understanding of how debt can cause mental suffering and a restraint over desire is critical factors.

4. Poverty as a Cause of Instability In Society

The second part of the problem of poverty is that it can induce unwholesome conduct, which has the potential to cause instability in society. This social aspect of poverty is illustrated at length in one discourse.¹⁴ There are four implications that can be drawn from the discourse: (1) favorable characteristics of society; (2) a link between poverty and immorality; (3) the role of confidence in Karma; and (4) the role of the government in society.

First, the story envisions a prosperous, peaceful, stable and secure society, where people have long life spans, beauty, happiness, wealth, power, and know only three kinds of disease: greed, hunger and old age. These conditions within society are achieved and maintained because everybody strictly observes the ten courses of moral conduct- three right thoughts, four types of right speech and three right actions of the Noble Path.

¹² Ordinary diseases are usually curable by a suitable remedy, but hunger has to be appeased daily.

¹³ While the impermanence of the body must be contemplated, it does not prevent one to do the best to cure bodily sickness.

¹⁴ D. CakkavattiSihanadasutta 26, PTS: D. III, p.58

Second, it provides a profound link between poverty and immorality. First, economic well-being is a prerequisite condition for a peaceful society because poverty is the main cause of immorality and social disorder. In addition, immoral conducts cause a decrease in life-span, beauty, happiness and wealth in the long run. When assistance is not given adequately to the needy, poverty becomes widespread. Because poverty raises improper desires and does not permit one to be generous, it is root of many crimes and unwholesome actions. It causes theft and robbery, then killing- telling deliberate lies- speaking evil of others- committing adultery- harsh speech and idle chatter- covetousness and hatred- false views- incest, homosexuality and deviant sexual practices- lack respect for parents, ascetics and the head of the community- fierce enmity, fierce hatred, fierce anger, thoughts of killing and actual killing among beings.

Third, the story demonstrates that confidence in Karma can bring forth a prosperous and peaceful society, which facilitates the cultivation of the mind. In Buddhism, the practice of moral conduct can give rise to conditions that promote prosperity, health and long life, immediately and eventually. The practice of morality, including these favorable conditions, can be maintained by confidence in the results of good actions. Confidence here can arise through a clear understanding of Karma, or right view. The mechanism of how confidence in Karma can induce a peaceful society can be understood as a co-operative condition in which each individual believes in the same moral set, thus leading to a higher moral society. The peaceful condition is, however, unstable because some individual may deviate from that set of beliefs and action, causing social disorder again.

Finally, the discourse shows that some type of institution is required to enforce the stable condition in the short term (i.e. one life time). In other words, confidence in Karma is a necessary condition to sustain a prosperous and peaceful society whereas the government has a duty to maintain order among individuals with different levels of confidence. In Buddhism, it is considered unwise to eradicate crimes through greater punishment. The appropriate remedy is to improve the economic conditions of the people first.¹⁵ Once everyone is able to make his or her own living, morals can be observed and crime will disappear.

¹⁵D.Vi. Kutadanta sutta.26

5. The Solution of Poverty

In a Sutta of AnguttaraNikaya, the Buddha says eliminating the poverty and strengthening the financial state is compulsory to be happy for lay people. It says,

“iti kho bhikkave dāliddiyampidukkhaṃ lokasmiṃ kāmabhogi
nainadānampi... vaddṭṭipi...codanāpi...anucariyayāpi...bandanampidukkham
lokasmimkāmabhogino”¹⁶

The poverty is a suffering in this world. The person who get debt due to the poverty it also will be a suffering, profit of the debt also will be a suffering, he had to live under other’s blame, the person who gave debt pursuit him, and he had to live under punishments. These statements show us miserable situation of the poverty.

The Buddha shows the way to escape from the poverty. The Buddha says suffering should remove through effort. The Buddha mentions very important thing which very useful to eradicate poverty from the society. In the Byagghapajja sutta, the Buddha mentions that accomplishment in initiative, accomplishment in protection, good friendship and balanced living¹⁷ are needed that lead to the welfare and happiness of a clansman in this present life. This explanation shows Buddhist perspective on the earning and outflow. When people practice these four factors which lead people gradual economical development, can eliminate poverty from the world.

Mostly poverty increase due to over exploitation of natural resources and labors. Buddhism introduces it as un-righteous. Buddhism mainly advices to leaders of the country to consider about People’s life style. The poverty is the main cause to improve un-righteous behavior among people. In present world people always try to develop within very short period to overcome the poverty. Mostly they do un-righteous profession and earn wealth. In Buddhism never admire un-righteousness.

¹⁶ A.III. Ina Sutta.p-351-354, A. Vi.45

¹⁷ A.IV.282

In KutadantaSutta propose three factors to give solution for poverty.

1. In the country who likes to do agriculture the political leader must provide food and seed-corns to them.

2. In the country who likes to run business the political leaders must give capital to them.

3. In the country who likes to do government services the king must give wages to them.

Through these kind of plan poverty and other social issues can solve permanently. If the king gives wealth to individual people according to their action it is not permanent solution. When leaders provide seeds, capital and wages people do their job and live happy prosperous life with their families. Some scholars interpret this sutta as follows also.

I. Provide profession to all who can work.

II. Equally sharing the capital among needy people

III. Equally share the wealth or profits among people.

IV. If there disables or helpless people giving aids.¹⁸ According to People's skills leader should support them to cut down on the poverty and to develop the country.

6. The Role on Economy

In Cakkavattisihanada of the DigaNikaya explains about ten duties of a Cakkavatti king. Among them mainly explain the king should give his more attention to poor to protect peaceful, moral situation of the country. The king should provide righteous protection and treatment to every living beings and vegetation of the country. Then he should provide wealth or capital to needy people. In this sutta mention the poverty occur in the country due to mishap of the leaders. Economic ethics covers a wide range of issue: types of work or business practices, the approach to work in general and entrepreneurship in particular, the use to which income is put, attitudes to wealth, the distribution of wealth, critiques of politico-economic systems such as capitalism and Communism, and the offering of alternatives to these in both theory and practice. In a Buddhist context, it also entails a consideration of such issues in relation to lay citizens, governments, and the Sangha.¹⁹

¹⁸Hettiaracchi Dharmasena, *Bauddha Arthuka Dharsanaya*, 1991, pp- 323-324

¹⁹An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, Peter Harvey, London, 2000. p-189

The Buddha mainly mentioned on economic ethics for the ruler in the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta that distribution of wealth among poor is a duty include in the set of norms that are to be followed by a university monarch – askkavati-raja as a designated in canonical texts²⁰. If take in the literal sense “adana” means the poor. Another duty of a cakkacatti-raja is the provision of ‘ward’ care and protection’ (rakkhavaraganagutti)²¹ for various categories of people in the country.

It can be assumed that ethical economic management for a ruler or governor is determined by the absence of poverty in his domain, rather than by a surplus of wealth in his coffers or in the hands of a select portion of the population. When this basic standard is met, the teachings do not prohibit the accumulation of wealth or stipulate that is should be distributed equally. If Cakkavatti-norms fails to give wealth to those who has no wealth, the poverty will be increased and this lead to numerous deeds of corruption in the society, consequently.

The Kutadanta Sutta suggests the provision of basic capital to people to get self-employed according to their capabilities, inclinations and also in keeping with the needs of the nations’ economy²². The provision of the infra-structure, primary needs and payment of reasonable wages²³. Similarly the Kutadanta Sutta suggested also the provision of food and other basic needs to those who are not in a position to obtain them or do not receive them for some reason or the other²⁴. Similarly important, according to the texts, is the setting up of a viable fiscal policy, an effective system of taxation which while not unduly burdening the taxpayer at times of difficulties²⁵ would enrich the state coffers at times of economic boom in the country²⁶.

The AggannaSutta explains the origin as well as the social acceptance of the system of private ownership. The advance effects of this system are minutely analyzed in the Cakkavattisihanada Sutta. These sources clearly demonstrate that it is this system if private ownership that gave rise to series of corruptions and evil practices begging from

²⁰ D.III, P 61

²¹ D. III, P 60

²² D.P 135

²³ Ibit

²⁴ Ibit

²⁵ S.I.P 57

²⁶ D.IP 134

stealing and ending in ruthless massacre of each other. This, however, does not mean that prior to the origin of the system of private ownership, there did not exist any form of corruption or evil.

7. Conclusion

In Buddhism, they are called the basic requirements of living. Especially the moral issues associated with material wealth. It is apparent that material well-being is one important factor contributing to the development of a Buddhist economic community. The primary objective of economic activities in Buddhism is to alleviate poverty. The proper way to deal with crime, is to first improve the economic condition of the people. When people are thus provided with opportunities to earn an income, they will be content, have no anxiety or fear, and will not cause harm to the society. These conditions will lead to a peaceful and prosperous society. As a result, a type of Protestant asceticism emphasizing the accumulation of wealth which was then invested into one's secular business and (according to Weber) contributed to the development of modern capitalism in the West, never was encouraged in the Theravada tradition once the idea of Dana became dominant. Some scholars go even further and argue that this very tradition of dana is an important reason for the slower development of modern capitalism in countries with a strong Theravada tradition.

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