

BUDDHISM AND PERSONALITY DEVELOPMENT

By Ven Somaloka, Australia

Buddhism has very often been described as a 'pessimistic religion' because it so often and so clearly defines "Suffering" as the cause of all our human problems. But it cannot be denied that by this very token, Buddhism asserts the existence of a 'personality' although not in the accepted western sense of something that is tangible and permanent. This personality is not subject to the whims and fancies of all-powerful Being which dominates every aspect of its existence. On the contrary, Buddhism clearly assigns to the individual personality the sole responsibility of seeking emancipation for itself. This article seeks to explain how an individual is the cause of whatever unhappiness he is heir to. But at the same time, the individual is also the Master of his own salvation. Only the Buddha has given man so much dignity, which of course means a greater responsibility for the individual to seek his own salvation. "By ourselves is evil done, by ourselves we pain endure. By ourselves we tread the path: the Buddhas merely show the way."

Venerable Somaloka, a Sri Lankan monk now resident in Australia is doing missionary work through religious talks in many Australian universities and also conducting meditation classes.

This, and the following article "Buddhism and Mental Health" by Alec Robertson, both try to show how the Buddha preceded and even superseded modern psychiatry and psychology twenty-five centuries ago.

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Buddhism has more than two thousand five hundred years of history. It came into being in India which was one of the few civilized countries of the world at that time, and since that time it has been a living message to the world.

Due to the very fact that Buddhism has been a significant factor in the history of ideas, its nature as well as impact on humanity has been studied from different disciplinary points of view. Recently, for example, experimental psychological methods have been used to understand the psychophysiological effect on those who practise Buddhist meditation.

Even though Buddhism has such a long history (and has attracted scholarly attention from various intellectual methods), scholars are still in dispute with regard to the question of whether Buddhism is a religion, a system of philosophy, a psychological system, a way of life, a theory of life, and so on. This type of question was presented to the Buddha himself. His answer was that he was not a generaliser or dogmatist, but an analyser. Taking into consideration the richness of the ideas dealing with the nature of personality, for our purpose we may say that Buddhism is an interpretation or a discovery of the nature of human existence.

I think this definition is quite legitimate. After all, when we consider the impact it has made on human society – socially and intellectually – various types of approach are possible, as well as necessary.

With awareness of these possible ways of approaching our subject of Buddhism, our discussion here is mainly based on some of the basic material of early Buddhism. (We will have a quick glance at the importance the Buddha gave to the question of self-understanding).

One of the basic assumptions of the Buddha is the necessity of self-understanding in order to gain a healthy personality. In other words, ignorance or lack of correct understanding of one's nature and its conditions, is one of the culminating factors of personality disorders or unhealthy states of personality.

The motive of the Buddha's emphasis on this matter can be seen closely through his own personal life, and it is rather interesting to note the background which moved him in his spiritual quest. It says that before he entered into the spiritual or religious life, (if I may use the term) he had a very successful and gratifying life; and after renouncing that mundane life he had the opportunity to study with the great sages of India at the time. The maturity he gained through these experiences is quite apparent in his teaching.

In Buddhist literature it says that the driving force of the Buddha to attain Buddhahood was his awareness of certain problems connected with human existence, and this very awareness made him determined to realise the true nature of life and find a solution for himself as well as for the rest of mankind. (In other words, his desire to gain insight into the nature of life was encouraged by his personal experience and observation, as well as the compassion he had towards suffering humanity.)

When one studies the Buddha's teaching, one can see that it is true that his message is closely connected with this insight and compassion. Not only was he moved by insight and compassion, but also his sole purpose was to encourage the gaining of insight and the development of compassion.

There is no doubt some may consider a part of his teaching as a formidable challenge to a number of religious as well as social doctrines. Fortunately, regardless of this

difference, not only Buddhists but also some non-Buddhists have managed to grasp the value of Buddha's teaching and thus respect him. For instance in 1964 the Archbishop of Perth, the Most Reverend George Appleton, in a broadcast said: "I find it difficult to speak of him without deep emotion, so great is my admiration and affection for him. As a Christian I believe that I need the sevenfold gift of the Holy Spirit to tread the Eightfold Path of the Buddha."

A teaching like the Buddha's which encourages insight and compassion, certainly cannot have any intention of winning over other's faith. The Buddha very emphatically demonstrated that he had no desire to win followers or wish others to fall from their religious undertakings or wish to establish people in wrong ways, or make others give up ways that were good. Buddha has outlined his own teachings thus:

To know what is to be known,

To develop what is to be developed and to eradicate what is to be eradicated.

Above all it seems that the most important force in his life before he attained enlightenment as well as after, was his experiential awareness. He questioned and encouraged others to question the reality of life as it is expressed in individual and social life, not just for the sake of shaking off what we are, but purely for the importance of developing oneself. The following passage, rather paradoxical in tone, evidences the above remark: The Buddha said -

"Before my Enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, being myself subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilements, I sought after what also was subject to these things. Then I thought, why, being myself subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilements, do I seek after what is also subject to these things?"

This is a fact about ourselves which we all ought to contemplate on. Unbiased and genuine awareness of these phenomena would reveal one of the most dominating factors which govern all of our lives.

As we said earlier, early Buddhism pays a considerable amount of attention to the importance of understanding the true nature of personality.

Because, Buddhism assumes the development of intellectual capacities – particularly the faculty of understanding as an essential factor for personality development, - from its early stages Buddhism has developed a psychological approach to the problems it deals with. This particular point has drawn the attention of modern psychologists. As an example we note the following remarks of the Swedish psychologist Rune Johannsen who studied early Buddhist literature:

“Anyone with a good knowledge of psychology and its history who reads the Pali Nikayas (Pali Nikaya means early Buddhist Scriptures) must be struck by the fact that the psychological terminology is richer in them than in any other ancient literature, and that more space is devoted to psychological analysis and explanations in this, than in any other religious literature.”

It is quite true, that early Buddhism is psychological in essence, although it may have some different attitudes, compared to modern psychology as far as the methods and aims of psychology are concerned. The psychological nature of Buddhism is quite apparent, in the way it tries to conceive the problems of life – whether they are expressed on personal or social levels. Buddhism believes these problems have their roots in human personality, and that they can be solved, by proper adjustment of the personality itself. Because of this very psychological orientation of Buddhism, it has paid tremendous attention to the person and the problems within the person, to the exclusion of some metaphysical problems.

The Buddha’s teaching on the concept of person which is directly connected with its aim of the development of personality, has two methodological approaches, or in other words the system of Buddhist teaching has two aspects:

1. The theoretical exposition of the structure of person and,
2. Practical guidance or what is normally called meditational techniques to be used as experimental methods of developing mental and intellectual capacities.

Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of the concept of person forms one of the most important aspects of the Buddha’s teaching. The motive of this analysis is to bring out the personality factors and the conditions which determine the nature of person as such. Buddhism takes the person as a psychophysical unit as expressed in physical, mental and intellectual activities, which are the personality factors in a wider sense. Buddhism assumes that these personality factors are conditioned and subject to causal laws. By careful observation and analysis of these factors and how they operate, Buddha discovered also, that human beings do possess a number of potentialities, and also due to some other equally significant factors, that we are constantly subjected to “suffering” which is the symptom of the unhealthy personality. It is important to note (at the outset), the term “suffering” is commonly used as the English equivalent to the Buddhist term “*Dukkha*”, but the term “*Dukkha*” covers a much wider area of emotional aspects of our life such as our experiences of unpleasantness... unsatisfactoriness... difficulties... frustration etc. In a wider sense, *Dukkha* or suffering in the Buddhist context is the inevitable outcome of our attitude to ourselves and our environment, which (attitude) is conditioned by erroneous views.

One of the dominating factors that keep a person in this constant state of suffering is our own unawareness/ignorance of our true nature or reality. The possibility of attaining a wholesome state of personality is based on realistic acknowledgement of

human capacities. But the problem is reinforced by the fact, that (unfortunately) we lack the understanding of how we should direct our potentialities.

Thus the theoretical foundation of the Buddhist idea of personality development or the possibility of gaining a much healthier state of personality, is based on observation and analysis of the two fundamental facts of human life... the potentiality of human beings and the universality of suffering. It is certain that close attention to these two facts would show us, that as far as the physical world is concerned, we have managed to make so many miraculous achievements both in it and with it. At the same time as far as personality is concerned, we are facing more and more unhealthy experiences. Both these aspects of life are equally true and the solution must be in them also. Buddha assumed this is the case, that is:

Not only the problem and solution to the problem of life, but also the possibility of a much higher state of personality is also within ourselves.

It is important to note the fact that although Buddhism recognizes the importance of theoretical understanding, it is well aware of the danger involved in uncontrolled theories. From the Buddhists point of view one of the factors that hinders development of personality is the conceptual tangles we are trapped in, with regard to our true nature, experiences and values.

As far as the theoretical exposition of the Buddha's teaching is concerned, it is analytical in essence, connected with constructive aims. The Buddha's own words show that he appreciated the analytical approach towards problems of life as well as understanding those problems. It is important to note here that the term "analysis" in the philosophical context nowadays is much more concerned with analysis of the language, to the exclusion of facts, but in Buddhism it is used in both senses....analysis of facts as well as concepts or expressions.

It is important to note the Buddha's caution with regard to the intellectual or theoretical approach to problems of life. As we said earlier the theoretical approach of Buddhism is closely connected with the understanding of our true nature. In other words, from the Buddhist point of view theoretical understanding is essential on two grounds: In the first place, "ignorance" is conditioned and nourished by conceptual tangles and secondly, elimination of false views or conceptual purification awakens, and solves most of the human problems and consequently leads to a healthier state of personality. However, it is assumed that the application of theoretical understanding should be properly guided. This is the reason why early Buddhism takes a rather silent attitude towards some so called metaphysical problems. Unfortunately some scholars have misunderstood the Buddha's attitude of silence.

It is true, that in early Buddhism one cannot find exhaustive speculative dialectic on metaphysical problems which have no immediate relevance to the correct understanding and solving of problems associated with life. (In fact there is not much

encouragement to waste our intellectual capacities roaming around sophisticated but futile questions).

The following case is worth quoting, for it brings out the fact that the Buddha certainly did not have the interest to waste his time with those so called metaphysical problems and shows why he was silent about them. One day a monk called Malunkya putta came to the Buddha to question him on some metaphysical problems such as... Is the universe eternal or is it not eternal? Is the universal finite or infinite? Etc. etc. and interestingly he told the Buddha that if these questions were not answered, he would not continue the holy/ religious life under him. Then the Buddha pointed out to the monk how wrong it is to follow a religious life on conditions irrelevant to such a life and without (having) a proper understanding of what is the aim of a religious life. After that he presented the following illustration: Suppose a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow and his friends and relatives bring him to a surgeon for its removal. Supposing the man should then say, "I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me with it, what is his name, whether he is tall or short, the type of arrow, and with what kind of material the tip of the arrow was made.... and so on. Surely, if this were to happen, the man will die without knowing any of these things!"

Buddhism demonstrates to us that we are like the wounded man. We are being attacked by the arrows of time, decay, sickness, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief etc. these are the facts about ourselves and we all experience them without exception. And what we really need is a proper and realistic explanation of these facts of life. There is no time to waste on irrelevant problems when there are so many urgent problems of life waiting to be solved. Buddhism advocates the fact that most of our problems of life are determined and nourished by our inability to direct our capacities to self understanding. The value of human knowledge can be appreciated not just because we can know anything whatsoever which comes to our grasp, but only if we can use that gift to know what should be known. There are so many things in this infinite world one can pursue and explore without ending. And so the Buddhist silence on so called metaphysical problems viewed from a realistic point of view of life can be more appreciated.

As we said the Buddha's silence on (certain) metaphysical issues is quite consistent and essential for the structure of his teaching but it is not, in any sense an escape route from those sophisticated problems but rather a necessary step for gaining systematic understanding of the person himself which will naturally solve these external problems as they deserve. (Fortunately there is an understanding of the necessity of the silence of the Buddha among some philosophers themselves. For instance, Professor E.A. Burtt, the Sage Professor of Philosophy at Cornell University, in his article entitled, "The Buddhist contribution to philosophical thought", says that this is one of the most important pieces of advice the Buddha gave to philosophers. In his own words, "no philosophy which has failed to understand them and meet their

challenge can hope to stand”).) As Professor Burt quite rightly suggests the Buddha’s silence on those metaphysical problems is not something that can be counted as lack of philosophical interest in the Buddha’s teaching but shows the philosophical insight he had for a constructive philosophy.

(At the same time it is important to note the fact that Buddhism does emphatically value the necessity of clear understanding of problems associated with life, depending on how far they are necessarily involved with understanding the true nature of life. One of the main characteristics of a developed person from the Buddhist point of view is his knowledge and vision of things as they are. (The criteria for the highest attainment of personality development are the release from the factors that keep a person in intellectual darkness as well as mental and physical discomfort. The knowledge and vision of things as they are is essential for this release of freedom.)

Incidentally it is worthwhile to remember the fact that the Buddhist contributions to the history of ideas are in no sense limited to one particular aspect of knowledge. As we remarked earlier, Buddhism is not an escape route which is a common element in most systems and doctrines but the message of this silence is that while being aware of the existence and possibility of much more sophisticated problems, one should not fall in love with those problems just because they are attractively argumentative. What Buddhism is interested in, is “not just to ponder and wonder over these weighty problems but to recondition/release the problem-bearers themselves. This is the reason why Buddhism pays such tremendous attention to the importance of the understanding and development of the person himself”.

This particular point that we should direct our intellectual capacities towards much more direct and rewarding matters, is one of the most important contributions the Buddha made for intellectual minds to consider. It is beyond any doubt, that among the subjects one can study and by studying can gain much more constructive results, the most gratifying is the one in which the person himself can take the most unique place.

As we said earlier Buddhism emphasizes the importance of the proper understanding of the nature of “suffering” which is the sign of an unhealthy state of personality. In the Buddha’s well known teaching on the Four Noble Truths – that is,

the truth of suffering

the cause of suffering

the cessation of suffering, and the way to eliminate suffering, this universality of suffering as well as the possibility of attaining a healthy state of personality are acknowledged.

As is usual some scholars have misinterpreted the Buddha's emphasis on the phenomenon of suffering. Some of them comment, that Buddhism is trying to interpret life as an expression of pessimism. But this representation has not much substance. After all, Buddhism is not unnecessarily optimistic either. It is *realistic* in essence as far as it tries to awaken ourselves to our true nature. To hold any theory against reality is quite contrary to Buddhist principle. Buddhism certainly emphasizes the universality of suffering because suffering indicates the consuming factor of life which needs more understanding and a therapeutic approach. Suffering with its various expressions is something which demands more than soothing answers. For instance, Freud's untiring observations and concern shows us the need for scientific attention to the phenomenon of suffering.

The proper understanding of the nature of suffering with its conditions would show us that this is not merely an aspect of our life but the determining factor of our personality. In other words, Buddhism assumes that suffering is not something which can be confined to just what we normally experience as suffering. Suffering is the expression of much deeper problems of life. There is no one who is an exception to this phenomenon, which constantly accompanies our existence until its roots are removed. This is the reason why Buddhism assumes the release or cessation of suffering as the criterion of the healthy personality.

After all there is no need for anyone to present a heavy philosophical argument to prove the fact of suffering. But the importance Buddha gave this universal phenomenon is not just to make people much more aware of the problems, but to encourage us to see the much deeper problems associated with it. Not just to get rid of what is miserable but mainly to show the possibility of attaining a much healthier state of personality.

In a sense, from the Buddha's point of view, "suffering" is the key term to the understanding of the necessity of personality development. As we said earlier, the Buddha believed that careful observation and analysis of the phenomenon of suffering would show us much deeper and subtle problems of our personality.

Let us contemplate on the following paradoxical case (which we mentioned earlier). The Buddha said:

"Before my enlightenment, while I was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, being myself subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilements, I sought after what also was subject to these things. Then I thought, why, being myself subject to birth, ageing, ailment, death, sorrow and defilements, do I seek after what is also subject to these things?" In this paradox the Buddha observed a rather fascinating aspect of our life. That is, we know that we have not transcended the possibility of being subject to those stages of life such as ageing, sickness, death, sorrow and defilements etc. and most importantly as we know that our attitude towards them is

rather repulsive. In simple terms, we do not like them or anything which is subject to them.

On the other hand although we are subject to such things this does not disturb our desire for gratification or hankering after gratification. But the point is that the things we desire or hanker after have not transcended the nature of the phenomena we do not like! Because of this conflicting behavior between our attitude and the nature of things we desire, our whole existence seems to be controlled or dominated by such confused factors. It is important to remember the fact that any instance of suffering in our life can be traced to that conflicting behavior. As it is implicit in the foregoing observations, Buddhism finds suffering or conflicting behavior is connected with confusion and ignorance of the nature of our beings.

So Buddhism assumes that in the wider sense our whole existence with its ambitious exploration and massive desire for sensory gratification or what is normally called “need for happiness” is ultimately based on the constant struggle or desire to go against the reality. On the one hand, we do not like the reality of things and on the other hand we like or desire the same things, at the expense of undermining or ignoring the reality. We have the tendency to see things against their true nature. Or, when we want something, the nature of things does not seem to bother us. This is, of course, because we do not like things, when we see them as they are. But this does not stop us from confronting the reality, sooner or later, for things will not change their suchness, to satisfy our desire. This desire or tendency to go against reality, seems to be the cause of suffering. NOT the reality of things themselves. Just question, why don't we like the suchness of things or why do we cry over the reality? This is the fundamental problem of our life, which is rooted in self ignorance. The fact is, we don't have real understanding of the nature of ourselves, or our desire, and most importantly our desire is conditioned by wrong understanding or self ignorance.

What is it, that inability to see the suchness and reluctance to admit the suchness – if it is not, self ignorance? And what can we expect from ignorance, apart from suffering? From the Buddhist point, ignorance is not only the cause of suffering, but it itself, is the greatest suffering. The very awareness of our true nature, is the governing factor, of all the personality problems, regardless of how they manifest. Whether it is manifested in the sense of intellectual uncertainty or personal insecurity or social unrest – in simple words, there is an element of self ignorance; involved in almost any aspect of human life and activity. This seems to be the reason, (regardless of the tremendous advancement we have made in understanding and controlling the physical world) why personality disorders have been a dominating problem in our life. This is what Buddhism talks of in terms of SUFFERING. The awareness of ourselves is the most essential factor to develop, a healthier state of personality.

Having realized the nature or the suchness of human existence, the Buddha has presented a unique path, consisting of theoretical expositions of what we are, as well

as meditational techniques, by which one can develop mental and intellectual capacities. The aim of both aspects of the Buddha's teaching, is to see things as they are, and to eliminate those factors, which continue to keep our personality in an unhealthy state. The criteria of this achievement are supposed to be expressed in our physical, mental and intellectual dispositions or what is normally called the behavior of the person.

Our main purpose has been to show that Buddhism is mainly concerned with the importance of proper understanding of the suchness of personality factors, and this is based on the assumption that correct/realistic understanding is essential for personality development. Buddhism, in order to show the necessity and possibility of attaining a perfect and healthy state of personality, firstly encourages us to see some of the basic problems of our life which necessarily should be eliminated. Two of these problems are unawareness of the necessity of applying our intellectual capacity towards ourselves, as much as we are interested in exploring the external world. Secondly, reluctance to gain insight into the deeper problems expressed through suffering.

Buddhism assumes that not only the problems and the escape from them, but also the possibility of gaining a healthy state of personality is within ourselves.