

FOUR GROUPS OF HUMAN BEINGS

In Buddhism we can find that the Buddha has divided human beings into the following categories:-

- (1) Those who go from darkness to darkness
- (2) Those who go from darkness to light
- (3) Those who go from light to darkness and
- (4) Those who go from light to light.

In the first category the Master includes the unfortunate folks born in families that lack the necessities of life. They are handicapped in many ways such as to be afflicted with ill-health, deformity, social stigma, and to suffer from a lack of the good things which make life worthwhile. Placed in this unfortunate condition they care not for virtue being deeply engrossed with their temporal worries. Even if the Excellent Law of the Buddha is preached next door to them they will find no pleasure or interest therein. Far from appreciating men who lead pure and holy lives, they would like to join those who scorn such people and hold them in ridicule. Being ignorant of the Dhamma they would commit unskillful actions by thought, word, and deed. After death as a result they would be born in a state of suffering. This is the first category of folks who go from darkness to darkness. We have too many of such folks in the world today and it is a fact to be lamented. But something can be done to help them to understand the Dhamma. This can be done by a process of careful planning.

In the second category come those folks born in unfortunate families similar to those of the first mentioned. Such an unfortunate man listens to the preaching of the Buddha-Dhamma. He gains confidence in the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, and by a voluntary effort in the teeth of difficulties, practises skilful deeds in thought, word, and deed. He treads the path of virtue and lives nobly and worthily in accordance with the Dhamma. Such a person after his demise is born in a realm of happiness, or as a fortunate being, and he comes under the category of those who proceed from darkness to light. A case in point would be Suppabuddha, the unfortunate leper of Savatthi. He lived during the time of the Exalted One, and

in addition to his extreme poverty he was afflicted by a dire disease. Once he saw a large crowd of people assembled near the city. He thought that food and drinks were being distributed, and went there in order to obtain something. On approaching he found that it was not an alms-giving but the Buddha preaching the Dhamma. He had the good sense to decide to go and listen, though many a man in his position would not have cared to do so. He gained confidence in the Buddha, and decided to practise skillfulness in thought, word, and deed. Before long he died being gored by a bull, but prior to that he attained the first state of sanctity. He was born in the realm of the devas and outshone the rest in brilliance and splendour. Would the present-day Buddhists who, though they are unfortunate here, make use of this human life in order to obtain a happier existence in the manner of Suppabuddha.

Under the third category come the folks born in a privileged society. They are gifted with wealth, beauty, nobility of birth, and all the good things of life. They care not for virtue or good advice and seek evil friends. They become inebriated with good health, (arogya mada) and the mere joi de vivre (jivita mada). Their motto becomes “Eat, drink and be merry for to-morrow we die.” They are too engrossed with pleasure hunting to listen to the Dhamma and fashion their lives accordingly. The chief causes of one’s degeneration enumerated in the Parabhava Sutta, Dissipation, Drinking, and Gambling, wield a great fascination over them. Being ignorant of the Dhamma they practise not skillfulness in thought, word and deed. After death they soon come to grief and are born in a state of woe. The valuable human life which was earned by some good kamma in the past is entirely lost, and these folks go from light to darkness. Their descent is like that of a man who steps down from a balcony to the back of an elephant, and from thence to a chair, and from that to the ground, remarks the Master.

As an example, we may cite the case of the three millionaire friends who during the time of the Kassapa-Buddha found themselves the heirs to a large estate. They conferred with each other as to how they should make use of this wealth. They decided to enjoy themselves thoroughly. They joined evil friends, and before they died were reduced to beggary on account of debauchery, drinking, and dissipation. After death they were born in the Avici Hell. There, suffering untold misery and finding no end to their woes, they are recorded as having uttered three sounds, in an attempt to express their agonized thoughts in three stanzas. These sounds when reported to the Buddha were explained in their full context with the history behind the utterance. By these stanzas they have expressed their regret for their foolish behaviour, and a desire to lead virtuous lives should they ever be so fortunate as to gain rebirth as a human being once again.

Under the fourth category come those who proceed from light to light. They are the fortunate people born in noble families, and brought up in comfort, possessed of wealth, beauty, health, and all the things considered fortunate. They enjoy life within the limits of good morals. They give heed to good advice and listen to the Dhamma. They gain confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and practise skill in thought, word, and deed. This was one such Minister of State, during the time of the Buddha, and of him the Master is reported to have said:-

“Even though he be richly decked in garments, if he be restrained and possessed of self-control, and tread the path of virtue, if he has discarded the cudgel toward all beings, and is harmless, such a one is a true Brahmin, a true Recluse and Monk.”

This is the four-fold classification of human beings by the Exalted One in his teaching. It should be our earnest endeavour as Buddhists to fashion our lives by skillfulness in thought, word, and deed so as to obtain a rebirth that would conduce to our happiness and not to our misery. To waste this human life in the pursuit of low ideals, and thereby get into unhappiness is not worthy of one who calls himself a Buddhist. After all, the efforts of all beings are calculated to obtain happiness. No one in his sense seeks pain, hence why should we not accept good advice and acquire skill in the pursuit of this ideal of pursuing happiness and avoiding pain.

Now what precisely are skilful thoughts, words, and deeds, and what are unskillful thoughts, words, and deeds, that the Exalted One refers to in this Discourse.

Unskillful thoughts are, covetousness a coarse form of acquisitive desire uncurbed by even good morals, and allied thoughts, thought of harming and injuring others, and erroneous beliefs e.g. disbelief in Kamma, non-recognition of the good effects of good deeds, etc.

Unskillful words constitute, (speaking of falsehood, lying, distortion, and suppression, when one is expected to reveal what one knows), tale-bearing with a view to increasing the ill-will and antagonism between people, harsh words that injure other people's feelings, abuse, slander and so forth and frivolous talk that is both meaningless and profitless, e.g. gossip, boasting of one's abilities, relating “yarns”, etc. This type of talk is neither conducive to one's nor another's welfare; it is a waste of time and promotes garrulity.

Unskillful deeds are killing or taking life, theft or misappropriation, and sexual misconduct, and also excessive indulgence in the other sensual pleasures.

A follower of the Buddha should avoid these and practise instead skillfulness in thoughts, words and deeds. Discarding covetousness, he should entertain thoughts of renunciation realising that not by the possession of the whole world would the latent greed in man be satisfied. Discarding hatred, he should cultivate thoughts of love towards all beings. He must live and let live. He should be a friend to all that has life. Discarding erroneous views, he should cultivate correct views. He should seek the company of friends who are nobler and wiser and learn from their good advice as to what are correct and incorrect views.

In contradiction to speaking the untruth, he should endeavour to be truthful. Abandoning harsh words that cut like javelins and injure the hearts of his hearers, he should be refined and cultured in speech. The Buddha says, be refined in speech like the citizens. Thus we see that the town-dwellers were cultured and refined in their speech even in those days. The harsh language of the vulgar folk and the rowdy should be abandoned and refined speech of a gentleman should be cultivated. Discarding tale-bearing, he must speak words that consolidate goodwill between parties that are already aggrieved. He should try to spread concord, and by no means try to fan the flames of envy and jealousy.

Abandoning killing he must spread thoughts of goodwill towards all beings. There is already enough suffering in the world of men and beasts. So we need not increase the suffering in this world by our wanton behaviour, such as going hunting and by indulging in other forms of cruel pastimes, because such wickedness recoils on the cruel man who indulges himself in this type of thoughtless acts. Or at least it would be kinder not to increase the suffering already existing in this world.

In this manner the follower of the Buddha has to avoid the unskilful and cultivate the skilful. Let us by example and precept help ourselves and others in the practice of these virtues. By such a life we become a blessing to the society in which we live and by no means be a menace even to animals.

This is a plain and simple exposition of the fundamental ethics of the Buddha-Dhamma, and is primarily meant for laymen. Therefore, all who call themselves Buddhists would do well to study and practise the Dhamma.

