

HOW A TRUE RELIGION SHOULD FUNCTION

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RELIGION, (By religion a way of life is meant) cannot exist without society. One may say that religion is something personal and individual. But society consists of individuals.

A true religion should function not only for the spiritual or mental development of mankind, but also for the material progress. Man cannot live on thoughts alone however wholesome they may be. Before he directs his thoughts towards mental development he should have economic security. The Buddha is emphatic on this point.

The Buddha did not all the time confine himself to a cell, but wandered from town to town and village to village through the highways and by-ways of India. He moved more with the commoner than with the aristocrat. Kings and princes came to him for guidance and instruction, but the Master went to the poor, lowly and lost, to help them.

He knew the people from the lowliest walks of life to the highest and was well aware of the political, social and economic conditions of India during his time. That being so, he did not restrict his sermons and discussions to matters of high philosophy and advanced psychology.

As a practised teacher of infinite compassion and understanding he was mindful of the social and economic well-being of the masses and always wished by his advice to alleviate the misery of people, and see that they lived without too much unhappiness. It is true that real happiness is derived from a life of purity and peace; but it is obvious that without a certain degree of material and economic security no moral and spiritual progress can be achieved.

So far as a monk is concerned there are four requisites for progress on the path to purity and freedom. They are robes, food, lodging and medicine. These are the bare necessities without which no human being can live. Basically, they are also the fundamental needs of a layman.

Although the Buddha did not attach much importance to material progress in the modern sense nor to mundane welfare, he did not entirely ignore it, because it is the basis for man's mental or spiritual progress as pointed out above. The Buddha was very outspoken with regard to certain aspects of material conditions and social welfare. So it is not quite correct to say that Buddhism is

interested only in lofty ideals and that it ignores the social and economic welfare of people. As the discourses clearly indicate, the Buddha looked at life as a whole, in all its social, economic and political aspects

Code of conduct

The code of conduct set forth by the Buddha is no mere negative prohibition but an affirmation of doing good – a career paved with good intentions for the welfare and happiness of all mankind. These moral principles aim at making society secure by promoting unity, harmony and right relations among people.

No Man can live in isolation. We are dependent upon one another. We must learn to live together in concord and amity, without quarrels, in harmony and unison, regarding others with gentle looks of loving kindness instead of the fierce glare of unfriendliness, and bring together those at variance and encourage those already in unison.

Knowing that true social service could bring about such wholesome results, the Buddha instructed and encouraged people to be of help to themselves and to others. In Buddhism to protect oneself is not egoism, not selfish security, but self-discipline and self-training. To the extent that we are morally and mentally strong and confident, so can we help others.

Altruism, as a principle of action, is based on our character and mental development. One must train, must guard oneself to be of service to others. A person may be large hearted, sociable and ready to succour others, but if his private life is questionable, and leads to no good, from the stand-point of the Buddha, he neglects himself very badly, and really cannot serve others; he is no real helper of society.

In the Sigala Sutta, the discourse to the young man named Sigala, the Buddha's doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is set forth in a domestic and social ethics. The sixty one duties enumerated in this discourse speak in no uncertain terms the moral obligations and social service of every individual in society. These are reciprocal duties to be performed by parents, teachers, wife and children, friends, relatives, neighbours, servants, workers and employees and religious men.

It is stated categorically that the king should rule righteously and not unrighteously. Never resting on his laurels, the king or ruler is expected to be kind and dutiful to his subjects like a benevolent father to his children. In order to be just, honest and upright to all without partiality or favouritism the ruler is expected to avoid the four wrong ways of treating people: that is with desire,

anger, fear and delusion. In this respect, Asoka the Great of India, may be regarded as one of the most just, wise and benevolent rulers of all time. This is shown by the edicts:

“All men are my children.”

“Just as I want my own children to enjoy all prosperity and happiness in this life and the next, so I want the same for all men.”

“The world should be comforted by me. From me the world should receive happiness and not sorrow.”

“There is no duty higher than to promote the happiness of the whole world.”

“Work I must for the good of the whole world.”

Asoka endeavoured to educate the people not by spreading the deeper philosophy of Buddhism but by spreading the ethical and social aspects of it. He caused such teachings to be engraved on rocks and they became sermons on stones, not metaphorically but actually.

If we carefully study the history of Ceylon, we find that those rulers who were aware of the admonition of the Buddha endeavoured to lead a righteous life and guided the people both morally and economically.

All our social service, our progress, economic or otherwise, should be just and righteous, and not devoid of Dharma, law or truth, and not at the cost of moral and spiritual values.

As the Buddha so clearly pointed out Karuna, love and compassion, is the virtue that urges man to engage in all social work, to work for the good of others. *If you remove Karuna from the teachings of the Buddha you remove the heart of Buddhism; for all virtues, all goodness and righteousness have Karuna as their basis, as their matrix.*

Compassion is surely not a flabby state of mind. It is a strong enduring thing. When a person is in distress it is the truly compassionate man's hearts that trembles.

Through love one adds to the fund of human happiness, one makes the world brighter, nobler and purer and prepares it for the good life better than in any other way.

If one has developed a love that is truly great, rid of the desire to hold and to possess, that strong clean love which is untarnished with lust of any kind, that love which does not expect material advantage and profit from the act of loving,

that love which is firm but not grasping, unshakable but not tied down, gentle and settled, hard and penetrating as a diamond but unhurting, helpful but not interfering, cool, invigorating, giving more than taking, not proud but dignified, not sloppy yet soft, the love that leads one to the heights of clean achievement, then in such a one can there be no ill-will at all, and he is the true social worker in the eminent sense of the term.

So serve to be perfect. Be perfect to serve.