

# **The Foundation and Scope of Human Dignity In Buddhism**

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Human dignity is one of the main issues discussed in the teaching of the Buddha. Dignity is true worth or excellence as socially defined and is rendered meaningful within the culture which conditions each society in its own distinctive way. Man in society assumes his dignity primarily in terms of his capacity to transcend his physical environment and create much wider social and cultural environment on a global basis. Why do we call him "Man", "What are the characteristics distinctive to him", "How does he assume dignity", are the few basic questions relevant to this topic which will be discussed here briefly.

"Manussa" is the Pali word used to denote "Man", which means "Being whose thinking capacity is comparatively higher". It is because of this power possessed by him that he is regarded as superior to all other beings. Buddhist cosmology tells us that there are thirty one planes of existence differing one from the other by physical structure, mental composition, and its development. Metaphorically speaking, these planes of existence are situated one above the other within innumerable world systems. Since Buddhism recognises billions of world systems or galaxies with various types of beings in them, the human realm exists within these world systems. Buddha is the highest example to show that man is superior to all other beings. It is by becoming human only that one can cultivate the highest virtues and true wisdom leading to the attainment of Buddhahood

Human dignity becomes meaningful in two distinct and alternate paths: One is in terms of his relation with other beings; which we term as "Society", and the other in terms of his endeavour to transcend this cycle of existence which we call "beyond the world of suffering". Since we are primarily concerned with "Man in relation to Society", this paper will confine to some of that aspect leaving behind the most complex transcendental and philosophical aspects of the topic.

The word "Society" in Buddhism assumes much wider meaning than its sociological definitions. It not only means any "Organisation", "State" or special community but all other beings both human and non-human. In order to sustain social dignity, Buddha formulated a code of behaviour

common to all men, irrespective of their religious affinity. This Code of Behaviour is popularly known as "*Pancha Sila*" or five precepts. In Buddhism, this was identified as "*gihi-dhamma*" (layman's duty).

*Pancha Sila* provides the basis for Buddhist morality. They are capable of guaranteeing to the people, the dignity of life and ensure harmony, concord and integration of the society. Each precept of the *Pancha Sila* has positive and negative aspects in it, such as : (1) I will refrain from destroying life. I practise loving kindness. (2) I will refrain from stealing . I respect others' property rights. (3) I will refrain from sexual misconduct. I observe social norm. (4) I will refrain from lying. I will be faithful to others. (5) I will refrain from taking intoxicating drinks and drugs. I will be mindful of my duty to others.

The essential relation between men, women and children in society according to Buddhism is one of the symbiosis and not one of parasitic or antagonistic. This type of relation is well illustrated in the Sigalovada Sutta. It gives in detail the way how relation should be maintained between Parents and Children, Teachers and Pupils, Husband and Wife, Friends, Relatives and Neighbours, Master and Servants and the Clergy and Laity, and shows the duties which each of them should perform towards others in order to strengthen social relations.

Social justice is the other important factor for human dignity. It is the duty of the state to enforce a legislation to curb every type of injustice to safeguard individual rights, to ensure human security and dignity. The meaning and scope of "*Pancha Sila*", if we examine them analytically, could be seen that they are formulated to achieve the same thing which the law is intended for. The scheme of reward and punishment in the *Pancha Sila* is much wider than in the legislation because *Pancha Sila* scheme of reward and punishment follows not only in this life but also through many more future lives of the same individual. *Pancha Sila* speaks to the human consciousness while legislation to the human society. Therefore these two concepts together make one whole administrative system.

The Buddhist text recommended that the good King or the head of the State should practise moral law (dhamma) in order to create a just society. If he is vice, others follow suit.

The Republic of Vajji in Northern India was one of the ideal states in Buddha's time. In that State, people lived happily and contentedly because the rulers observed a code of parliamentary ethics, which the Pali Canon referred to as "*satta aparihariya dhamma*", seven conditions of welfare. In their parliamentary sessions they assembled in concord, dispersed in concord, and carried out their undertakings in concord. They were cautious not to make new laws detrimental to their customs and traditions and to abrogate the existing laws, and have honoured the law-making institutions. Paid homage and reverence to the elders. Have given due honour to the womenfolk. Abduction of women and detention of them by force is prohibited. Paid reverence to their old shrines. Allowance was given to the temples. Saints and virtuous men were given protection. Met often in parliament to discuss matters of importance to the country. Buddha accepted this "Politico-morality" as an essential factor for the social justice.

The most superior administrative system, as referred to in the Pali Canon is the kingdom headed by "Cakkavatti" (World Emperor). He derives his ruling authority from the "Dhamma" righteousness. The concept of "One World Order" or "One Economic System" could be the idea taken from the "Dhamma" (righteousness). This is from the administration system of cakkavatti kingdom referred to in the Pali Canon.

Another important factor which contributes fairly largely to the development of human dignity is the economic aspect of the society. If production, distribution and consumption are the principles of economy involving the rather complex process of buying (Kaya), selling (Vikkaya) and profit making (Uddaya), then the Pali canon could be considered as a source book on that subject.

In order to control black marketing and deceitful trading by using wrong weights, coins and measures, the Buddha has shown the retributive effects that they get for their wrong deeds and advised traders to have a fair deal with their customers.

As regards the question of income and expenditure of an individual, the Pali Canon says that man must divide his income into four, and take one part for his daily bread, and two parts to invest in business, and the last part to be kept in safe deposit, which could be used in unforeseen urgencies of life.

The method of utilising the wealth thus accrued is another striking teaching in Buddhism. The Buddha said that man must utilise his wealth (a) for the happiness of his parents, wife and children and household servants; (2) for the happiness of his friends and relatives; (3) during unexpected calamities caused by flood, fire, earthquakes, sicknesses, acquisition by king or robbery; (4) for treating guests, feeding animals and birds, giving to the needy; (5) for family's death rituals, paying state duties and helping Temples, Churches and Clergy.

From the few examples given above, one could see that the Buddha considered economic, legal, political, and all other multi-faceted social aspects as requisites for the foundation of human dignity. It cannot be attained, however, by a purely psychological change in terms of a thorough going cleansing of the individual mind only. Nor can it be brought about exclusively in terms of an outer revolution that is in terms of radical change of "institution". The Buddha's teaching not only emphasises the primacy of inner-change, but points out that this inner change must necessarily be translated into reality by an outer change as well.

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