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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Summary

This article emphasises Buddhism asserts one is accountable for their own liberation. It describes the ways one can achieve this through practicing mental discipline, concentration, upholding moral virtues and following the Noble Eight-fold Path as indicated by the Buddha.

BUDDHISM AND SELF-DISCIPLINE

By Professor N.H. Samtani and Professor U.D. Jayasekera

Introduction

Many religions place their explicit faith, confidence and belief in a supreme god-head, a saviour being, dispensing favours and punishment, as the case may be; to whom these various religionists implore with bended heads and folded palms, to grant them favours and blessings, and final immortal bliss, the ultimate union with this god-head in the heavenly kingdom.

Buddhism however, is the sole exception to this mode of belief. It explicitly denies the existence of such a supreme deity, powerful and benevolent, presiding over the destinies of other beings, and capable or ready to grant this blissful emancipation they seek. On the other hand, Buddhism, while unequivocally asserting the supremacy of mankind over even celestials, not only denies the ability of any such god-head to grant salvation to anyone else, but also goes further in declaring that one is one's own saviour, and that one has to attain this goal by one's own individual effort.

For this purpose, Buddhism has also precisely indicated the manner in which the individual should exert himself/herself in order to achieve this treasured goal. The individual has to his/her own work, the Buddha has only indicated the way - tumhehi kiccam atappam, akkhataro Tathagata.

Mental Discipline - Sila

According to Buddhism, the most important single faculty associated with an individual is the faculty of the mind, since it is indicated to be the spring-board for every action of every individual, both good and bad, righteous and unrighteous. It could thus be seen that the mind is of vital importance in the search for one's salvation.

Accordingly, Buddhism advocates its adherents to discipline and restrain the mind in order to reach the desired goal of emancipation from the inherent state of suffering associated with this samsaric existence. The important role the mind plays in connection with every action of every individual being, has been highlighted by the Buddha in the following manner (in Pali with English translation):

Mano pubbangama dhamma

mano settha, manomaya

manasa ce padutthena

bhasati va karoti va

tato nam dukkhamanveti

cakkam va vahato padam

Dhammapada - 1

All phenomena (originating from a sentient being) - *dhamma*- are preceded by (the activity of) the mind, have as their chief agent, the mind; and are made up of the mind. If one were to speak or act with a polluted mind, sorrow follows one (as a consequence) even as the cart-wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws (the cart).

Mano pubbangama dhamma

mano settha, mano maya

manasa ce pasannena

bhasati va karoti va

tao nam sukhamanveti

chayava anapayini

Dhammapada - 2

All phenomena (originating from a sentient being) - *dhamma*- are preceded by (the activity of) the mind, have as their chief agent, the

mind; and are made up of the mind. If one were to speak or act with a pure mind, happiness follows one (as a consequence), even as the shadow that never leaves one.

The mind is the main faculty which gives life and meaning to every living being. As has been already indicated, the mind has to be developed to its full capacity in order to achieve one's goal of emancipation. According to Buddhism an individual consists of three main constituent factors, they being name - *nama*, form - *rupa* and consciousness *vinna*. In the absence of the last mentioned *vinna* consciousness or mental faculty, a human being is nothing but a dead entity, sans life and sans action.

In the journey towards final emancipation, Buddhism has advocated three developmental phases, namely moral virtue - *sila*, mental concentration - samadhi and wisdom - *panna*. Sila is a code of moral ethics directed towards restraining and developing the mind, which is described in the Buddhist texts as fickle, and difficult to control or restrain.

The wise man therefore is advised to restrain and control it like a fletcher who fashions out a straight arrow.

Panca-sila Precepts

The restraining or the disciplinary process in respect of body and speech, is brought about by the observance of sila or moral virtue. The *panca-sila* or the five precepts are the primary ethical code advocated in Buddhism, which every Buddhist is expected to cultivate daily.

The first precept in this connection is the abstinence from killing any living being, man or animal - *panatipata veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*. This precept accepts the principle of the sanctity of all life, and establishes the fundamental right of every living being to live his own life to its normal end, and indicates that there is no valid justice or authority for anyone to kill or destroy any other living entity. In Buddhism, this vital injunction is not only extended to every living being, but it also enjoins its adherents to extend unbounded loving kindness to them all, in the manner of a mother who protects her only child as if he were her own life.

Mata yatha niyam puttam

ayusa eka puttamanurakkhe

evampi sabba bhutesu

manasam bhavaye aparimanam

Karaniyametta Sutta

Just as a mother protects her only child as if he were her own life,

(one should) extend thoughts of unbounded kindness to all living beings.

The second of the panca-sila precepts is directed towards the preservation of the sanctity of rightful ownership. The formula, *addinadana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, enjoins a Buddhist to abstain from appropriating anything not willingly given to him. This clearly concedes the right of any person to own and possess his own wealth and property without being wrongfully or deliberately robbed or snatched away by anybody else.

It may be mentioned here that while Buddhism does not decry the possession of wealth, it only condemns ill-gotten wealth, and wealth that is of no benefit to oneself and to society.

The third precept, *kamesu micchacara veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, enjoins a Buddhist to abstain from wrongful sex indulgence. According to this precept no individual has any right whatever, to disturb the harmony and serenity of the family life of any other person through misconduct in sex behaviour. It is not necessary here to narrate the numerous calamities presenting themselves in society all around us, and the degrading consequences that emerge as a result of the violation of this essential code of social ethics, so detrimental and baneful to the existence of a harmonious and peaceful social climate.

The fourth precept, *musavada veramai sikkhapadam samadiyami*, expects an individual to refrain from uttering falsehood. Since one's speech is of vital importance in the transmission of cultural traditions, and the maintenance of a social equilibrium, it is very necessary that one's speech should be a source of well-being and solace to society. Abstinence from lying generates harmony in social living by not only accepting the value of truthful speech, but also extending a sense of trust and confidence in it. Gentle and truthful speech is a great blessing to all alike, and a highly desired boon to treasure.

Bahusaccam ca sippanca

vinayo ca susikkhito

subhasita ca ya vaca

etam mangalamuttamam

Mangala Sutta

Much learning, skill in arts and crafts, well trained in discipline, pleasure in speech - these are highly treasured.

The present-day society being widely rampant in distrust, suspicion and ill-will, it is highly necessary that such baneful attitudes should be eradicated as soon as possible in order to provide the necessary social climate for peaceful living among individuals.

The fifth and the last precept in the *panca-sila* code, *surameraya*

majjapamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami, abstinence from taking intoxicating drinks, ensures a healthy, balanced and unperturbed mental state in the individual, so very necessary for living a dignified and chaste life.

An unbalanced and ill-functioning mind manifesting itself with the ill-effects caused by the consuming of baneful alcoholic drinks, prevents a person from conducting himself as a normal mentally healthy being, preventing him from being able to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice, and making him behave in a most ludicrous manner in society, destroying his sanity and balance almost completely.

Atthanga-sila Etc.

The Buddhist *panca-sila* precepts are the basic moral training advocated for Buddhists to adhere to. Their universal beneficence is clearly discernible when we look around and observe the alarmingly abundant calamities and misery manifesting themselves in society due to very many transgressions in this direction.

The *atthanga-sila*, *ajiva-atthamaka-sila* and the *dasa-sila* are moral precepts, which are usually observed during special days, such as the full-moon day of each month. Unlike in the case of the *panca-sila* precepts, these are normally observed at a special place like a Buddhist *vihara*, or a religious temple. The *atthanga-sila* (eight precepts) are, abstinence from killing, abstinence from appropriating anything not specifically offered, abstinence from living a non-holy life, particularly non-chaste, abstinence from uttering falsehood, abstinence from consuming intoxicant drinks, abstinence from partaking food after mid-day, abstinence from associating in singing, dancing, music, unseemly shows, and the use of garlands, perfumes, unguents, and things that tend to beautify and adorn the person; and abstinence from the use of lofty and luxurious seats.

The *ajiva-atthamaka* precepts too contain eight precepts in all, but are slightly different from the eight precepts already noted, they being abstinence from killing, from taking anything not specifically offered, from indulgence in wrongful sex behaviour, from uttering falsehood, malicious speech - *pisuna vaca*, harsh speech, frivolous talk, and from improper livelihood.

Then there are the ten precepts, which, inclusive of the precepts already indicated in the eight precepts, there is the added injunction of abstinence in the acceptance and the use of gold and silver.

All these *sila* precepts are directed towards the disciplining of the person and his speech. The disciplining process for an individual consists of a three-fold stage of training, *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna*; moral virtue, mental concentration and wisdom. Moral virtue is brought mainly by the observance of *sila* practices. These are directed towards the physical component and the speech factor of an individual.

We have already indicated the importance of the mind in the restraining process. The next stage after *sila* is where one has to restrain and discipline the mind through *samadhi* or mental concentration; mind, as already noted, being the spring-board of every action. It may here be noted that while physical and verbal restraint are easy of attainment than mental restraint. *Citta* or the mind which is indicated as being both the seat and the organ of thought, is declared difficult to perceive, extremely subtle and wandering about where it lists, being bodiless and difficult to guard or control. Of the three main factors of name, form and consciousness which constitute the person, the consciousness, or the *vinnana* factor leaves the body at death. It is to this factor that we have now to turn our attention to.

Mental Discipline - Bhavana

It has already been indicated earlier, that the mind is the most potent factor in the person of an individual. Its authority and power being enormous, it could very well make or mar a person. In fact, it is the creator of both good and bad, man and god, and the very perpetuity of this *samsaric* journey for the individual. While everything could be made subservient to a well-disciplined and well-developed mind, a fickle, unsteady and non-disciplined mind is subservient to everything else in the world. Knowing this fact, the wise should urge forth towards mental concentration or the disciplining of the mind as his next step, for which meditation is indicated to be the best course of action.

Bhavana or meditation as mental culture or mind discipline is a form of concentration of the mind, which means that the mind is kept fixed on a particularly suitable object of thought, concentration. The Buddhist books indicate forty such different topics of mental concentration. In fixing one's exclusive attention on any one of these particular topics means that the mind is kept directed on one particular centre of thought, so that one keeps one's extreme vigilance over it, restricting the mind and preventing it from wandering about. This situation brings about a state of one-pointedness in mental activity - *citta ekaggata*, producing a serene sense of even-mindedness - *upekkha*, and extreme absorption where all forms of undesirable factors such as hate, laxity and agitation are kept at bay, and mind experiences a joyful tranquillity and serene calm.

Meditation is of two kinds: *samatha* and *vipassana*. *Samatha* pattern of meditation is directed towards an attainment of quietude of mind, a tranquillity in which there prevails an atmosphere of extreme serenity. In this pattern of meditation, there are altogether forty topics, from which, one can select any particular topic as one may desire. The commonest topics among these are the four *satipatthanas* relating to the body, the sensations, the mind and phenomena respectively; the *Buddhanussati bhavana*, reflecting on the nine-fold virtues of the Buddha; *kayagata-sati bhavana*, reflecting on the body; *maranussati bhavana*, reflecting on the aspect of death; *anapanasati bhavana*, reflecting on the factor of in-breathing and out-breathing; and *metta bhavana*, the expression and cultivation of universal benevolence to all beings.

In the *vipassana* pattern of meditation - insight meditation, a person directs his attention at reflecting on the higher metaphysical truths, such as impermanence - *anicca*, suffering - *dukkha*, and non-entity - *anatta*, through the experience of which, an attempt is made to acquire an insight into the nature of things as they really are - *yathabhuta nana dassana*. Once this awareness - *sati*, is achieved a person comes to experience which is both truth and understanding or realization. As the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the first sermon delivered to the *panca vaggiya bhikkhus* by the Buddha indicates, this realization dawns on a person when one clearly comprehends that whatever is brought to being, that comes to cease - *yam klnci samudaya dhammam, sabbam tam nirodha dhammam*.

According to Buddhism, emancipation from all the misery connected with samsaric existence can be brought about by a process of progressive and gradual self-discipline, directed towards mental and spiritual development attained by cultivating practices of moral virtue - *sila*, mental concentration - *samadhi*, and ultimate wisdom - *panna*. The practice of engaging in *sila* virtues, such as the five precepts enables a person to develop a restraining tendency in his general demeanour. Restraining and developing the mind through both forms of meditation, *samatha* and *vipassana bhavana* enable a person to develop mental concentration - *samadhi*, which ultimately directs him on to the stage of acquiring *panna* or wisdom, emancipating him from the throes of *samsaric* existence.

Noble Eight-fold Path

To attain this stage, apart from the essential recourse of engaging in *sila* and *samadhi* practices; as indicated in the Buddha's first sermon, the proper path to pursue is the Noble Eight-fold Path - *ariya atthangika magga*.

This is what is called the Middle Path, *majjhima patipada*, which avoids both the extremes of self-indulgence - *kama sukhallikanu yoga*, and self-mortification - *atta kilamatanu yoga*. This eight-fold path consists of right understanding - *samma ditthi*, right thought - *sammasankappa*, right speech - *samma vaca*, right action - *samma kammanta*, right livelihood - *samma ajiva*, right effort - *samma vayama*, right mindfulness - *samma sati*, and right concentration - *samma samadhi*.

The seeker after salvation has to pursue this path, practising, as indicated earlier, moral virtue - *sila*, and mental concentration - *samadhi*. This leads the person to wisdom - *panna*, or understanding things as they really are - *yatha-bhuta nana*, that is, the basic truths of impermanence - *anicca*, suffering - *dukkha*, and non-entity - *anatta*, with the over-riding factor of the presence of conflict of suffering - *dukkha*, which has to be ultimately eradicated.

In this individual struggle for seeking emancipation from the overriding, ever present factor of suffering, one has to traverse along the eight-fold path, relying on the efficacy of moral virtue, and mental concentration. It may be repeated here that the entire effort is centred on the all-embracing mind

factor, which in fact is the destructor or the saviour as the case may be. The mind is the most potent factor, and hence it has to be developed to its optimum limit in order to reach this haven of ultimate deliverance from suffering - *dukkha*, which is *nibbana*, which in relation to one's life is compared to the extinction of a flame - *nibbanti dhira yatha 'yam padipo*, that is, extinction of a desire - *asavakkhaya*, and a cessation of becoming - *bhava nirodha*.

Cakkhu, Nana, Panna, Vijja, Aloka

The realization of this victory over becoming is thus brought about by the disciplining of the mind through mental concentration, which is an essential requirement to pursue in order to reach this cherished goal. How this wisdom or deliverance gradually dawns on the individual who cultivates this essential mental discipline is briefly narrated in the Buddha's sermon where the Buddha declares as follows:

pubbe ananussutesu dhammesu cakkhum udapadi, nanam udapadi, panna udapadi, vijja udapadi, aloko udapadi - in this doctrine (*dhamma*), unheard of before, there arose in me vision - *cakkhu*, knowledge - *nana*, intellect - *panna*, wisdom - *vijja* and light - *aloka*. Thus the final liberation brings about the ultimate, all-pervading light that clearly makes visible, the true nature of 'things' and the 'self'.

In order, therefore, to achieve this ultimate goal, one has to liberate the 'self' through the cultivation of *samatha* and *vipassana* meditation, which ultimately leads a person to the goal of *nibbana*. The Buddha himself has declared that he succeeded in achieving the All-enlightened state through the disciplining of the mental faculty.

Na cintayanto puriso

visesamadhigacchati

cintitassa phalam passa

muttosmi Mara-bandhana

Jataka – 118

The thoughtless man no profit reaps. — But see Thought's fruit in me, from death and bondage free.

Summary

To sum up: Buddhism does not rely on a supreme god-head for attaining one's deliverance from the rigours of samsara. It asserts that one is one's own saviour, and gives the individual the responsibility and confidence to seek his salvation through his own individual efforts, by pursuing along the noble eight-fold path declared by the Buddha, exercising moral virtue and

mental concentration. In this connection, it has been shown that the factor mainly to be developed is the mind, which ultimately has to be developed to its optimum extent; when it becomes liberated, and wisdom or panna arises, at which stage the individual reaches the state of comprehending things as they really are - *yathabhuta nana dassana*, which finally liberates the individual from all suffering in existence *jati*, and his departing this life is compared to the extinction of a flame of light, with no traces left of any further becoming.

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