

The Relevance of Buddhism in the Modern World

by

Princess Poon Pismai Diskul

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The Relevance of Buddhism in the Modern World

Throughout history, the practice, adherence and belief in religion has been a virtually universal aspect of human society. And as a rule, the increase in complexity and sophistication of a given culture has borne with it an accompanying increase in the level of ethical and philosophical development of that society's religious thought.

Today, however, the world witnesses a level of civilization and social complexity far surpassing that of any previous era. Yet out of the great thoughts and discoveries of our time, no new major religion has evolved. Whatever new religious concepts may have appeared, they have failed to reach the masses of humanity in the form of altering basic beliefs and practices. Most of the new reforms that modern institutions sometimes announce with pride are actually negative in character; that is, the termination of outmoded practices and the relinquishment or reinterpretation of embarrassing dogmas.

Rather than new religions, we find for the first time mass atheism, scepticism, pragmatism, and indifference. True, these anti—or non-religious—attitudes existed in earlier times, even back into ancient Greece and India. But in olden times they were largely confined to select groups of philosophers or other exclusive minorities. Today these ideas have penetrated to nearly all social levels, regardless of education, among the advanced nations of the world. They are virtually an instituted dogma in the communist nations, while in Europe and America they have insidiously encroached upon the traditional forms of religion. Educated members of the free Asian nations have begun to follow in the same direction.

It is not religion alone that seems threatened. Ethics, philosophy, metaphysics and mysticism also appear to wither before the onslaught of technology, industrialization, science and psychology. Such concepts as justice, virtue, infinite being and transcendental absolute that occupied the minds of the ancients are now challenged as being hypothetical at best. At worst they are said to be pure verbiage and syllogisms lacking empirical and experimental verification. And at this point the essential ingredients of metaphysics become lost. Mystical experiences, once regarded as communion with the infinite, now take the status of psychological phenomena, altered states of the nervous system better induced by chemistry than by meditation or prayer. Ethics as a philosophy suffers the same fate as metaphysics. Ethics as behavioural codes for conducting one's life are, in the eyes of traditional moralists, becoming mocked and disregarded. To those with less rigid standards they are becoming radically altered with new values appearing.

Such are the features of the modern age. What then of religion? Even the newest of the existing major religions, Islam, is well past its first millennium. Christianity, rapidly approaches its two-thousandth birthday, while Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism and Jainism all share roughly contemporary origins dating around 500 B.C. Judaism and Hinduism extend even further back into antiquity.

Our religions, then, are all products of bygone eras. They arose at a time when men thought in terms of magic, spirits and myths. Insanity was demon possession; hallucinations, messages from the divine. The sun moved around a stationary world, and one's fate could be altered by magic and rituals or by flattery and offerings to supernatural powers.

Banana leaves as wrappings and thatched grass for roofs have been used for centuries. With the advent of paper, plastics and sheet metal they quickly fell into relative disuse. Will the same happen to religion as men learn to modify and control their environment and

unlock the mysteries of creation? Will devout congregations be sought out and scrutinised by anthropologists and psychologists in the same manner that these scholars now pursue the Australian aborigines?

Only history will tell. Religion may not necessarily die. In Japan, one of the most modernised nations in the world, new and well organised sects with radical teachings have in a period of 20 or 30 years mushroomed to firmly embrace many millions of converts. Yet the nature of these sects appears to specifically relate to the emotional needs of certain segments of Japanese culture, and their impact outside of Japan has to date been negligible. Is religion anything more than a formalised displacement of human frustrations and insecurity, reinforced by indoctrination, utilising the human capacity to feel and shun guilt, and offering hope when human endeavours have reached their limits? In the words of Marx, "the opiate of the people." In the words of psychiatry, a formalised cultural neurosis.

Each religion must endeavour to answer these questions and challenges on its own. To do so honestly requires a detachment from vested interests and the courage to avoid rationalisation under the guise of reinterpretation. As a Buddhist, I shall endeavour to answer these questions within the framework of Buddhist thought, and such will occupy the remainder of this writing.

First of all, before any meaningful approach can be taken towards a so-called Buddhist position, one must clarify what form of Buddhism one is considering. The religious movement started in the Fifth Century B.C. by Gautama Buddha has, in the intervening centuries, taken on diverse forms and paths of development as it spread to new lands and cultures and intermingled with local beliefs and practices. Thus today we find different schools of Buddhism as unlike one another as they are from non-Buddhist religions. A Theravadan Buddhist monk may find himself closer in thought and spirit to a western psychologist than to a priest of the Japanese Jodo-Shin Shu sect. And the Jodo priest, if one could disregard name and form, would share much in common with many American clergymen on points where he would differ with Southeast Asian Buddhism.

I wish then to confine my discussion to the oldest known form of Buddhism that is, Theravada Buddhism which is the prevailing religion of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Ceylon. But I must be even more specific than this for I do not wish to discuss the various local traditions, ceremonies and later schools of thought that have become attached to Theravada. Rather I shall discuss the earliest known form of Buddhist thought—the teaching of the Buddha as recorded in the Pali language scriptures known as the Suttas and Vinaya. If one confines his attention to these earliest known Buddhist scriptures, the Western reader is often surprised by the contemporary ideas contained in writings that date back over 2000 years.

Perhaps most appealing to the modern mind (whether scientifically oriented or not) was the Buddhist emphasis upon free and rational inquiry. "Do not believe out of blind faith, do not believe merely on scripture, do not believe on mere tradition," said the Buddha. "Do not believe me just because it is I who speak. But when you have seen, examined and experienced for yourself, then accept it." Only the mind freed of vested interests and prejudices will really be able to so see and truly understand. Thus we read: "If others speak against me or against our order, be not angered or dejected. If they praise us, be not elated. Rather analyse what has been said and weigh its merits." The Buddha made full use of logic, debate and reasoning, and in so doing revealed a remarkable ability to resolve philosophical dilemmas that were purely semantic in origin. This he could do because his logic was based upon experiential data rather than metaphysical. He placed experience before logic in his quest for truth, and when he did use logic, it was based upon facts readily admitted by all.

Instead of commenting upon ultimate reality, he spoke of craving and sorrow. He frequently declined to expound upon ultimate origins and post-mortem existence and instead spoke of ordinary human experience in the immediate present. For, he explained, it is only in the here and now that we can act and thus affect our destinies.

Thus the Buddha taught no concept of a sin of disbelief. One is not damned because of a lack of faith, but rather suffers by one's own ignorance when one acts contrary to natural law. The Buddha never claimed divinity or a monopoly on truth. The truth was there for any man to find. His authority lay only in the fact that he had discovered it and could show others the way to this discovery.

In order to explain the central concepts of Buddhist teaching and practice we should first note the way in which Buddhism views man and his relationship to the world about him. For regardless of the oft-noted discrepancies between belief and conduct, our world view cannot help but influence the way in which we approach life's problems. For example, a man who firmly believes that all things are made by and governed by a personal and loving God will most likely direct a large part of his efforts towards beseeching that God in times of crisis, if not at all times.

Buddhism has no such personal God. The Buddha regarded the question of ultimate beginnings as irrelevant to the problems of life in the present. Change and cause and effect are the paramount features of the Buddhist concept of the universe. All things mental, physical and social go through an unending process of birth, growth, decay and death. Nothing finite is static, immortal or unchanging. Whatever has an origin is subject to cessation, be it man or mountain, consciousness or constellation. And what is it that regulates this unending flow of flux and mutation? The answer is cause and effect. Each existing condition becomes the cause of future conditions and these effects in turn become the causes of conditions which arise after them. Even the world itself will, after many aeons of time, wear away. But other worlds have existed before, and others will continue to arise into the unending future. There need not then be a beginning or an end to time but rather eternal cause and effect with world evolutions and dissolutions stretching back into the infinite past and continuing into the infinite future. All of these concepts are clearly stated in the Pali scriptures and require no degree of alteration or reinterpretation to find compatibility with the views of modern science.

Against such a philosophical background, Buddhist psychology takes an extremely radical position among the ancient schools of thought but a position that is quite modern when compared to contemporary psychology. Mind and body are not seen as a dichotomy but rather are regarded as interacting and interdependent phenomena that together comprise the individual. Mind does not arise without body or body without mind. And that aspect of the personality that we call the psyche is not itself a single, self-willed and independent entity. Rather it is an aggregate of memories, sensations, thoughts, desires and perceptions that continue to change from moment to moment throughout each waking day and continually adopt new attributes or components while abandoning or modifying old ones during the course of a lifetime. In Buddhism, this is referred to as *anattā* or "soullessness"; that is, man is not a soul or immutable spirit but instead is a dynamic, ever-changing psycho-physical process.

Such is the way in which Buddhism views man and the world. How does this relate to the religion as lived and practised?

In Buddhist thought the central issue in life is neither philosophical in the sense of resolving ultimate mysteries nor religious in the sense of worship, grace and salvation. Rather, the prime concern is happiness and sorrow. There are moments of true happiness

and fulfilment and moments of sorrow, frustration, irritation and despair. Whether it be the delights of heaven, the satisfaction of a task well done, the joy of unselfish love or the sweet taste of good foods, it is some sort of pleasurable experience or the expectation of such that makes life worthwhile and gives positive value to our existence. Conversely, be it the agonies of hell, the loss of loved ones, humiliation, physical illness or the dread of such things, there are moments of negative value that we continually struggle to avoid.

As already stated, the Buddha's teachings resemble those of science in that all things mental or physical come about through cause and effect, and pleasurable and painful mental states are no exception. Thus the solution to living is to understand those factors that produce desirable or undesirable states of mind and with such understanding guide our lives in such away as to minimise the unwholesome while developing the wholesome to its maximum possible realisation. Consequently the central teaching of Buddhism is the Four Noble Truths.

The first of the Four Noble Truths simply states that suffering, frustration, discomfort and unwanted experiences in general are an inherent aspect of life. The second states that the primary cause of such discomforts is desire. Third we are told that suffering can be overcome, and fourth is the means by which this is done.

The last of these Four Noble Truths, known as the Eightfold Path, thus forms the basis of Buddhist practice. It includes the disciplines, the practices and the insights by which one attempts to grow spiritually.

Impulses, feelings and desires determine our behaviour and also our relative happiness or sorrow. Therefore, the purpose of the Eightfold Path is to produce by means of discipline, self-understanding and intellect a new and better human being and to enable one to progressively mature towards the relative or absolute realisation of specific psychological goals. These goals are both negative and positive. On the negative side one seeks the eradication of greed, hatred, egoism, delusion, apathy and anxiety. The positive goals are to cultivate and develop love, compassion, equanimity, wisdom and insight. Greed, hatred and other unwholesome mental states are not only predisposed to sorrowful consequences; in addition they are in and of themselves agitating and discomforting. Conversely, love and compassion are more than forerunners of happy conditions; by their very nature they are meaningful and rewarding experiences.

As I have already stated, Buddhism regards the human mind as a compounded phenomenon of various attributes and qualities. Consequently, the techniques for development and purification of the mind must likewise be multi-dimensional and varied in accordance with individual needs. Educating the mind to right understanding; guiding speech, habits and profession into harmonious life patterns; cultivation of discipline and energy, and meditative stilling of the mind to bring about awareness of subtle thoughts and feeling that normally escape awareness; these are the techniques and practices by which one progresses along the Eightfold Path. This is the practice of Buddhism, the living of Buddhism as originally taught by the Buddha himself.

Thus, one can question whether or not Buddhism was ever intended to be a religion in the usual sense of the word. For it advocated no form of worship, ceremony, prayer or appeal to supernatural intervention.

Buddhist ethical values develop as a logical consequence of what has just been discussed, and the result is a system of ethics founded neither upon tradition nor upon revelation. Acknowledging that actions are preceded first by thought and motivation, we see that good and evil originate from the mind. Thus, a mind that has realised the Buddhist goals of

subduing greed, hatred and egoism while developing love, wisdom and compassion is a mind that will have a natural and spontaneous virtue. The need for arbitrary rules of conduct will be greatly lessened, and one's goodness will be genuine rather than enforced or premeditated.

The great advantage of such an ethical system in the modern world is that it transcends but does not contradict the mores of cultural and national boundaries. At the same time it can be applied in a variety of different cultural circumstances with or without regard to tradition, history or taboo.

Therefore, while Buddhism proceeds from a very different set of premises than most other religions, we note a nearly complete agreement as to the standards of ethical conduct: love, kindness, charity and generosity are universally hailed by all of man's great religions regardless of whether their doctrines are built upon revelation, mysticism, metaphysics or psychological insights. Whether they teach divine creation or cause and effect, they all teach kindness. In addition, Buddhism takes a further step in this direction, that is, it teaches how to achieve these ethical ideals as living realities. It not only teaches to love; by psychological practices it tells how to achieve the genuine feeling that is love. For love and compassion, like all other aspects of this universe, arise through cause and effect.

In our discussion of Buddhism to this point, we see it as a system of psychological principles and practices that an individual can apply to the benefit of his own spiritual advancement and emotional wellbeing. Thus, the prime value of Buddhism in the modern world is that it shows one a way to happiness and peace of mind regardless of political and social environment. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the Buddha's doctrine was social and intra-personal to the exclusion of concern for human relationships and society at large.

The reason for emphasis upon individual development was founded upon the principle that the blind cannot lead the blind; or as the Buddha stated, "One, himself sunk in the mire of greed and delusion, cannot pull another out of that mire." One should first purify oneself to be able to show the way to others. The numerous instances in both ancient and modern times of religious and political atrocities committed by men who sincerely believed that they were serving the causes of justice and righteousness show the wisdom of this premise.

We can only have a better world when we first have better people. Fear, jealousy, egocentrism, hatred and greed are the original causes of human strife, be it petty crime or global war. Education, legislation and arbitration, while useful countermeasures, will not suffice to penetrate to the core of human motivation and alter one's basic ambitions and response patterns. Buddhism is structured to do just this. In fact such is its primary concern.

Personality cannot be separated from society. While the sum total of personalities determines the character and quality of a given society, conversely society influences and formulates the development of personality. This fact was readily acknowledged by the Buddha. He did not advocate social reforms such as we think of today but did deal directly with the social injustices of his time. Perhaps the best example is the caste system. He did not advocate a social revolution to replace this system, but any person who became a Buddhist ceased to have caste identity and thus was no longer subject to caste regulations. He thereby afforded men and women a way to escape from this social injustice, and at the same time he refuted the religious and philosophical rationalisations by which the priests and ruling castes attempted to justify the institution. In similar manner he opposed slavery and elevated the social status of women.

Recognising that civilizations have flourished under a variety of different political systems and that, because of the universal law of change no society or culture will endure forever, the Buddha did not advocate any particular type of government. When speaking of monarchies, he said the responsibility lay with the king, and the king should cultivate justice, charity, compassion and virtue, both for the prosperity of the nation and as an example for the government ministers and common citizens. A few democratic states existed at the time of the Buddha, and of these he said that they would continue to flourish so long as the citizens could assemble and meet in harmony and would maintain good moral standards.

In the centuries following the Buddha, his followers built hospitals and rest houses in accordance with his teaching of compassion. The great Indian emperor, Asoka, in the third century B.C. as a result of his conversion to Buddhism, stopped all wars and conquests, drained swamps, built wells and carried out other acts of public welfare. Other Buddhist rulers have followed this example.

The Buddha declined to preach his doctrine to a starving man until that man had been fed. And of illness he said: "Whosoever would honour me, whosoever would follow me, whosoever would take to my advice, he should wait upon the sick." And to his disciples he said: "Go forth into the world to spread the Teaching for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of all creatures."

Social ethics is but one aspect of the Teaching. Its primary concern is the reduction (and, finally, the elimination) of greed, anger, delusion and suffering. But these primary goals naturally and logically lead to a social ethic and one that operates independently of political, theological or doctrinal ideologies. For it works as follows: as men learn to lessen the greed, hatred and egoism that smoulder in their hearts, and as kindness and compassion gain prominence in human motivations, then will men strive to better the world in whatever way their immediate situation affords. For example, it may be food given to a hungry stranger, or it may be participation in a multi-million dollar campaign against world hunger.

May all beings be well and happy and in peace.
