

A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY IN EARLY BUDDHISM

Ven. Godamune Chullanaga
Sri Lanka Buddhist and Pali University

Introduction

The following books attempt to prove that Buddhism is an anti-social religion: *Religions of India* - By Max Weber (New York -1958), *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* - By T.R.V. Murti (London -1960), *The Sleep walkers* - By Arthur Koestler (Hutchinson – 1959), *The Bodhisatva Doctrine of Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* - By Har Dayal, (New Delhi - 1978). These authors represent early Buddhist thought as a teaching emphasizing personal salvation alone without any regard for social welfare. They assert that the attainment of Arahant hood is self-centric encouraging the individual to mind his own salvation alone leaving aside the rest of suffering humanity. Thus early Buddhist thought according to them has ignored service to the needy. To them Buddhism is devoid of any social dimension whatsoever.

Max Weber in his "Religions of India" Weber says in relation to early Buddhism: "*Salvation is an absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual. No one and particularly no social community can help him. The specific character of all genuine mysticism is here carried to its maximum.....*"¹ According to him Buddhism does not offer any relevance to daily life. It speaks of something beyond our experience. It is a religion to be practiced individually. Tirupattur Ramaseshayyer Venkatachala Murti in his "Central Philosophy of Buddhism" says "The ideal of the Arhat is the highest stage of the Hinayana system..... Again, the Arahant rests satisfied with achieving his own private salvation. He is not necessarily and actively interested in the welfare of others. The ideal of the Arahant smacks of selfishness; and there is even a lurking fear that the world would take hold of him if he tarried here too long....." ² Likewise all four of them have described Buddhism as an anti-social, selfish, mystical and socially sterile religion. Max Weber was responsible for the popularization of this interpretation of early Buddhism. He has

¹ Max Weber, *Religions of India*, New York -1958, P.213

² Murti T.R.V., *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London 1960, P.263

utilized the terms “mystical” and “asocial” to describe the nature of Buddhism and to state that there is no collective endeavor recognized in Buddhism. According to them, Buddhism teaches its followers to escape from society and that there is no social progress in a society where Buddhism is practiced.

The objective of this paper is to cite canonical commentaries and contemporary social facts to show that Buddhism is a social philosophy.

Methodology

This study will be based on early Buddhist scripture.

Discussion

The allegation that Buddhism is a religion with no socially important grounding can be easily refuted by focusing on the teaching which are directly connected to various basic social aspects such as the:

1. Three-fold meritorious deeds practiced by the laity– Dāna (giving), Sīla (virtue) and Bhāvanā (Meditation)
2. Four-fold modes of excellent life- *Cattāro brahmavihārā* - *Mettā* (Lovingkindness), *Karunā* (Compassion), *Muditā* (Altruistic Joy) and *Upekkhā* (Equanimity)
3. Ten meritorious deeds- *Dasapunññakiriyāni*
4. Ten perfections- *Dasapāramitā*
5. Ten principles to be practised by the king- *Dasa Rāja Dhamma*
6. Three-fold meritorious deeds- *Alobha, Adosa, Amoha*

These teachings clearly point out that Buddhism has a social dimension. Justice is not done to Buddhism by denying this obvious fact. No one can claim that Dāna (giving) for example, has no social benefits. The emphasis given to Dāna in the teachings mentioned above tells us that Buddhism functions in a well-knit society. This is further collaborated by the teachings of ten meritorious deed and ten principles of kingship. This contradicts the anti-social allegations against Buddhism. It should be mentioned here that the predicament of humanity is diagnosed in Buddhism as a consequence of social corruption and malpractices. A person’s position can be better only when social evils are eradicated. The lesson of Buddhism is that the individual alone is not responsible for his or her problems. Society contributes so much to the problem. This is

extensively discussed in the Aggañña Sutta and Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. It is quite strange that the scholars like Weber have not paid enough attention to these discourses. Similarly there is enough evidence in the Pāli canon to formulate a Buddhist concept of economics.

The Buddha has preached to reshape man's attitude towards environment. The Buddha has endeavoured to create a crime free society. To inculcate norms and values the Buddha not only devoted his entire life but also encouraged his enlightened followers to do the same. Isn't this enough to say that Buddhism has its own social Philosophy? In the pancasila or five precepts, it is quite clear that there are some resolutions taken by an individual in order to abstain from actions harmful to society and the individual, and the person is exhorted to cultivate certain virtues simultaneously for the benefit of society. For example a person abstains from killing while laying aside all the weapons of destruction (Nihita Daṇḍo Nihita Sattho). And he who is compassionate (Dayāpanno) becomes merciful towards all living beings (sabbapāṇabhūta hitānukampi viharati). Similarly a person, while professing to abstain from stealing, satisfies himself with only what is given (Dinnādāyī) and enjoys what is given (Dinnapāṭi Kaṅkhī).

Conclusion

In this way, these precepts also lead one to develop one's own character in relation to society. Hence these 5 precepts characterize the most fundamental socialization process in Buddhism. Resorting to meritorious acts one accumulates merits, the impact of which is to be realized not only in the next life but in this life as well. As all these topics have varying degrees of social implications, we can understand that the allegation that Buddhism is a religion with no concern for society can be easily rejected through critical examination.

References:

- Weber Max (1958), *Religions of India*, New York.
Murti T.R.V, (1960), *Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London.
Koestler Arthur, (1959), *The Sleep Walkers*, Hutchison.
Dayal Har (1978), *The Bodhisattva Doctrine of Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, New Delhi, Reprint.
Sutta Pitaka (Tripitaka - CD)