Buddhist Ethic for Social Interactions: Enhancing Respect for Each Other

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Abstract: Social interaction means “the reciprocal orientation of person or groups towards each other that is necessary for the initiation of social interaction and its continuance. On the other hand social contact is the contact between person and groups and that is a pre-requisite for initiation of social interaction.” The research paper with the topic entitle: Buddhist Ethic for Social Interactions: Enhancing Respect for Each Other will be discussed on various values in the Sigālaka sutta. In this Sutta, the Buddha described those with whom man should have good relations for seeking direction. He indicates how men should influence others by making them practice right actions. In the discussion, the Buddha described sets of pairs like wife and husband, teachers and pupils, parents and children etc., who should contact each other and behave in a moral way. It would automatically lead to a better social system.

1. Introduction

Social interaction is the reciprocal influencing of the acts of person and groups usually mediated through communication. It is based upon communication. An individual interacts with others through the medium of communication.

The Buddha started with the qualities of the person by putting emphasis on self-confidence, self-control and self-culture. The individual is the actor in all social interactions. He is like the mechanism of the car or its engine. The qualities of each individual will create the quality of any society. The Buddha described the qualities of the honourable man, and virtues contributing to the social contact and social interaction.

The Sigālaka sutta the Buddha described those with whom man should have good relations for seeking direction. He indicates how men should influence others by making them practice right actions. In the discussion, the Buddha described sets of pairs like wife and husband, teachers and pupils, parents and children etc., who should contact each other and behave in a moral way. It would automatically lead to a better social system.

2. The Lord Buddha started with Parents and Sons

“There are five ways in which a son should minister to his mother and father as the eastern direction. [He should think:] ‘Having been supported by them, I will support them. I will perform their duties for them. I will keep up the family tradition. I will be worthy of my heritage. After my parents’ deaths I will distribute gifts on their behalf.’

“And there are five ways in which the parents, so ministered to by their son as the eastern direction, will reciprocate: they will restrain him from evil, support him in doing good, teach him some skill, find him a suitable wife, and, in due time, hand over his inheritance to him. In this way the eastern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

As described above, this is the first fundamental relation which everybody must have in the family. The family is the fundamental unit of the society. It can be considered as the micro unit which plays an important role in developing the individual to adjust himself to society. Quite aware of the importance of family life, the Buddha laid down a set of virtues to be followed by each family member.

The Buddha emphasized the good actions which the son and daughter should perform for the pleasure and satisfaction of their parents. In the same way, the Buddha described a set of virtues to be followed by good parents as leaders of the family. The parents’ duties, in short, are to give instructions of virtues and knowledge to their offspring.

3. The Second Pair is Pupils and Teachers, the Buddha taught that:

“There are five ways in which pupils should minister to their teacher as the southern direction: by rising to greet them, by waiting on them, by being attentive, by serving them, by mastering the skills they teach.”

“And there are five ways in which their teachers, thus ministered to by their pupil as the southern direction, will reciprocate: they will give thorough instruction, make sure they have grasped what they should have duly
grasped, give them a thorough grounding in all skills, recommend them to their friends and colleagues, and provide them with security in all directions. In this way the southern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

The students’ life should be considered as the second step of getting experience from society. The first experience, man receives from home, and the second from educational institutions. In educational institutions the Buddha laid down the virtues contributing to a good relationship between teachers and pupils. From the above mentioned duties we find that the relationship between teachers and students is based on the virtues more than the economic condition. The duties of students encourage them to be of good behavior and to get more knowledge.

These duties make the personalities of students sensitive and polite, which is the desired purpose of education. Having considered the teachers’ duties, it has also been shown how teachers must be virtuous and not business-like. The personality of teachers must be delightful and sensitive. The teachers should make their students pay attention to art and science. Their duty is not only imparting knowledge to the pupils but also to protect them from any danger. The relation between teachers and pupils is very deep. It does not stop when pupils have finished their education but it continues forever. This relationship makes teachers worthy. The behavior of students will thus be guided by self-control, self-confidence and self-culture.

4. The Third Pair of Persons is Husband and Wife

When a son has finished his education, it is the time for the establishment of a family for him. It forms one of the important aspects of the parents’ duties. They must seek a suitable wife and husband for their son or daughter. This period of life is supposed to be the second step of life after education. The family life is very difficult and full of problems which should be considered and solved for mutual happiness and advantage. The activities in the family do not end in marriage but the marriage begins a new life. They have a mutual hope that they will have sons or daughters who make them happy. The Buddha laid down the mode of mutual relation and action which husbands and wives should have to act towards each other.

“There are five ways in which a husband should minister to his wife as the western direction: by honoring her, by not disparaging her, by not being unfaithful to her, by giving authority to her, by providing her with adornments.”

“And there are five ways in which a wife, thus ministered to by her husband as the western direction, will reciprocate: by properly organizing her work, by being kind to the servants, by not being unfaithful, by protecting stores, and by being skillful and diligent in all she has to do. In this way the western direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

The respect and honour which both husband and wife should exhibit for each other are the fundamental virtues. From the duties mentioned above, there is no system of a leader and a subordinate between husband and wife because the duties have been distributed clearly. Both are highly responsible to the duties that belong to each. They can enjoy life on the basis of mutual understanding and co-operation. Buddha, thus, lays proper emphasis on this aspect for a good family system.

5. The Fourth Pair of Persons is Friend and Associate

The Buddha believed in the necessity of co-existence of human beings as is the western idea that human beings are social animals. Friends play an important role in success and failure in life. This depends upon the behavior of each friend. In order to have a friend who brings happiness the Buddha described the virtues that contribute to friendship.

“There are five ways in which a man should minister to his friends and companions as their northern direction: by gifts, by kindly words, by looking after their welfare, by treating them like himself, and by keeping his word.”

“And there are five ways in which friends and companions, thus ministered to by a man as the northern direction, will reciprocate: by looking after him when he is inattentive, by looking after his property when he is afraid, by not deserting him when he is in trouble, and by showing concern for his children. In this way the northern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

The principles of contact among friends are based on mutual understanding and mutual interest. Friends play important roles for their friends’ success. This principle shows that nobody can live without friends but friends lead to different results. In political socialization friends are supposed to be called a “peer group” and play an important role in the political and social processes.

6. The Fifth Pair of Persons is Employer and Employee

In spite of the fact that the Buddha was a social reformer, he did not say in clear terms that slavery should be abolished. He did not take up the class struggle between the master and the slave. He, on the other hand, laid due emphasis on having a good relationship between the masters and the slaves
through a modicum of a set of virtues for both of them.

“There are five ways in which a master should minister to his servants and workers as the nadir: by arranging their work according to their strength, by supplying them with food and wages, by looking after them when they are ill, by sharing special delicacies with them, and by letting them off work at the right time.”

“And there are five ways in which servants and workers, thus ministered to by their master as the nadir, will reciprocate: they will get up before him, go to bed after him, take only what they are given, do their work properly, and be bearers of his praise and good repute. In this way the nadir is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

Each pair has five ways to act towards each other for having a good relationship between them. Having considered the masters’ duties, we find that two interesting points arise i.e. the distribution of duties to the servants in accordance with their abilities and the distribution of benefits. To appoint servants to the work for which they have a skill and pay the wages in accordance with the quality and value of the work are justifiable and desirable for the workers. From the Buddha’s idea the treatment which the master should show to his servants is based on kindness and not on oppression.

Social welfare is seen in the idea of relaxation to be given when the servants are ill. One may find the origin of the modern concept of giving rest and leisure to workers in the above idea of the Buddha. This condition increases morality among the servants and at the same time production will be also increased. The virtues of honour and diligence are the ones which every servant should follow. The servants should work hard with their skill and satisfaction with the wages which the master considers suitable for their work. This mode of action by which the servants serve their master will lead to close relationship and mutual co-operation between servants and masters.

7. The Sixth Pair of Persons is Disciples and Spiritual Masters

The last person whom the honourable man has to meet and receive is the spiritual master. Although there are many kinds of spiritual masters, they are different in each area. Most of them are religious men. They possess certain beliefs which are their way of life. The honourable man should not refuse these kinds of people but should encourage them in the best possible way he can.

In all traditional inner-path training a major role is played by teacher. The teacher is one who has “been up the mountain” of realization and can provide a reliable one-to-one guide to the hazards and pitfalls along the way. A spiritual teacher or director is best likened to a combination of tutor and athletic training coach.

The historic role of laypeople has been to provide material support for the monastics, and to try to follow their example as best they are able. The Lord Buddha taught about the role of laypeople as follow:

“There are five ways in which a man should minister to ascetics and Brahmans at the zenith: by kindness in bodily deed, speech, and thought, by keeping open house for them, and by supplying their bodily needs.”

“And the ascetics and Brahmans, thus ministered to by him as the zenith, will reciprocate in five ways: they will restrain him from evil, encourage him to do good, be benevolently compassionate toward him, teach him what he has not heard, and point out to him the way to heaven. In this way the zenith is covered, making it at peace and free from fear.”

Honourable men should receive and support spiritual masters. The spiritual master should offer his host voluntarily virtuous instruction and be a moral symbol for the people. They cannot interfere in family affairs but they can advise the way to heaven, the way towards a good life for happiness and peace in each family. They can provide for the peoples’ spiritual welfare by imparting the virtues to the people in every place where they arrive. They must not hope for social status or political power, but they must devote themselves for the happiness and peace of the people.

8. Conclusion

In the principle of social contact, we can find that the Buddha did not refer to the change of the social structure or refer to the social ruler but he referred to the question of the individual. The desirable characteristics of the individual are self-confidence, self-control, self-culture and self-knowledge. Virtue in individual development directly influences society. The Buddha said to the honourable men to avoid polluting actions towards other people. This means that when one wants to increase self-purity, one must not create trouble to another.

A good action by one person directly influences others and the scope of happiness and peace will increase from personal action to social action. The Buddha taught dependent origination. The actions of man, according to the Buddha, will not isolate him from other fellows. When one has happiness by following the virtues, another too would be influenced by his action. The social contact, according to the Buddha, can be understood by social peace and happiness in its relation to the individual. The numbers of virtuous individuals
increase in the society is in proportion to the increase of its peace and happiness.

The Buddha’s ideas on social contact were derived from the six quarters mentioned above, based on compassionate love. One of the western scholars in the team for translating *Sigalovada Sutta* noticed a beautiful idea that:

“In the attitude of parent to child love is at bottom a tender compassion, a vibrant care to protect. So wife love is largely motherly. Parent, wife, friend, master, teacher and religious man of all ranks are as little gods, so great is the responsibility attaching to these six positions, so fine is the opportunity for exercising compassion, tender care, and protection. In the six reciprocal aspects there is an element of childhood. The child under loving compassionate protection feels safe and confident, as does the believing worshipper.”

On the other hand the whole duty of the honourable man mentioned might well have included some corporate ideals of citizenship, because such duty supports both the domestic and social duty. In domestic and social action, the concept of goodwill and love between man and man is set forth as the main tenet.

Such a man is the one who works for his own good as well as that of others. This is not a man who can be called self-centered, who pursues a course of conduct that leads to his own benefit ignoring the welfare and happiness of those associated with him in social life. Nor it is the portrayal of a person who is altruistic in the extreme, who ignores his own welfare for the sake of those in society.

In short, the best individual, according to Buddhism, is the one who works for his own welfare as well as that of others. One truth has been generally recognized that there is no ultimate or absolute criterion by which we can decide what welfare or well-being is, for it depends upon various circumstances and conditions.

9. References

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