

13. *Buddhist Values in the Emerging Global Culture*, P.D. Premasiri, Dialogue and Universalism toward Synergy of Civilizations, Vol.VII, No.11-12, 1997, Poland, pp. 85-95.

DIALOGUE AND UNIVERSALISM

No.II-12/1997

'''

*P. D. Premasiri*

**BUDDHIST VALUES IN THE EMERGING GLOBAL CULTURE**

With the dawn of the scientific era the view that in order to obtain factual information about the world and ourselves, we need to depend on modern science, has won almost universal acceptance. Scientific knowledge progresses steadily with its method of formulating hypotheses and seeking the confirmation of them through observation and experiment. Knowledge in the pure sciences has enabled modern man to achieve tremendous progress in technology as well, which in turn has helped in the further progression of man's knowledge in the pure sciences. The theoretical as well as practical achievements of modern science have resulted in the relegation of other fields of inquiry into the sphere of the non-cognitive, the subjective, the relative or the mythical. Scientific issues are, it is commonly held, cognitively decidable, whereas moral, religious or value issues are not so decidable. They are sometimes explained as belonging to the sphere of human emotions and attitudes and are consequently believed to have no rational foundation.

Philosophy itself has been reduced to logical and conceptual analysis and its traditional role of serving as a method of rationally searching for life values has been almost abandoned. The philosopher does not seek to attain any knowledge about values in the traditional sense in which such knowledge was sought. In the opinion of most contemporary philosophers, in the sphere of values, the philosopher's concern is confined to meta-normative inquiry.

It is undoubtedly the rationality of man, and man's ability to reflect upon one's own experience, which are faculties unique to the species, that have been effectively employed in the various fields of inquiry with a view to understanding and explaining oneself and the world. These faculties have enabled human beings to achieve the kind of progress they have achieved in Science and technology. It is also because man is unique in the possession of the same faculties that make it as possible to human beings to raise questions of value, questions about the ultimate goals or ends of human life, what is right and wrong in human behaviour, how we as human beings ought to live our lives and what ideals we ought to pursue. Human beings are not content to act upon

~ .-

*Buddhist Values in the Emerging Global Culture X7*

opposition with traditional Western religious beliefs. Where science triumphed in this conflict it had considerable repercussions on certain religious values based on religious beliefs about the nature of reality. Although certain moral attitudes derived from traditional western religious values are residually present, most people who have come under the influence of the modern scientific revolution have a preference to adopt an evaluative standpoint which may roughly be described as one of scientific humanism. The global dominance of Western science has influenced not only people's factual beliefs, but also their moral attitudes. In the twentieth century traditional value perspectives with regard to human sexuality have undergone radical transformation. This transformation has considerably affected the traditional values relating to family life and the sanctity of the marriage bond. In the sphere of values the current conflict we witness universally is mainly one between the ideas of scientific humanism and those based on traditional or endogenous values.

The value system of Buddhism is not based on a theistic doctrinal foundation but on facts about human nature. In the *KCilama-sutta* (Sanskrit, *KCilama-sutra*) the Buddha rejects all forms of authority as a basis for establishing our values. 'Revelations, traditions and other authorities are not considered to be acceptable grounds for determining what is right and wrong, good and bad. Instead, the Buddha summons each individual to reflect on one's own upon questions of value and make one's own independent decision. This does not mean that every individual is free to make any arbitrary decision concerning what is right and wrong. There are, according to Buddhism, two fundamental criteria which are

relevant to decision making in the area of human values. The first criterion is the overall benefit of whatever is valued. This is a criterion which is applicable mainly in our moral evaluations. Morally right actions, according to Buddhism, are those actions which are beneficial to oneself and beneficial to others, and morally wrong actions are those which are harmful to oneself and harmful to others. The relevant benefit or harm is to be determined in terms of the happiness or well-being that is produced by the action.<sup>1</sup> However, this criterion does not imply a purely utilitarian theory of moral value. For in the case of determining the moral value of an action one also needs to see whether the contemplated action is in conformity with the Golden Rule criterion. Expressed in very general terms it is to follow the maxim of treating others in the way one would wish others to treat oneself. Even in the Western world, in philosophical inquiry concerning acceptable normative principles for our decisions of moral value two fundamental principles have been identified. One is known as the principle of beneficence. However, the principle of beneficence alone is found to be insufficient to establish a complete morality without the addition of a

<sup>1</sup>See *Anguttara-nikaya*, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, London: PTS, 1885-1900; Vol. I, p. 189; *Maiihima-nikaya*, ed. V. Treckner and R. Chalmers, London: PTS, 1888-1902; Vol. II, p. 114.

X6 P. D. Premasiri

impulse alone. They are not content just to live, but to live well. It is due to man's rationality and capacity to reflect that human beings do not permit impulse alone to determine their way of life. They believe that unreflective life is not worth living. The operation of human reflection and rationality in the sense just mentioned can be seen as the source of most of traditional philosophy, spirituality and morality.

Buddhism maintains that among non-human animals there cannot be any notion of ethical behavior (*natthi ettha kusala-kiriyii*). Aristotle emphasized the fact that the faculty of reason is the most important characteristic that distinguishes man from other animals. Indian thought emphasizes the human sense of values as the most important distinguishing characteristic (*dharmo hi teS'im paramo visesa~*) of human beings. However, the recent over-emphasis on the cognitive status of material science, and the denial of rationality and cognitivity to the more humanistic areas of inquiry combined with the increasing use of science and technology to satisfy human desires and appetites without due reflection on the limitations of the ensuing lifestyles have posed a great threat to human values. It is in this context Buddhist communities which have inherited a system of values need to reassess the importance of their inherited value bases and value structures in the light of the emerging global culture.

The influence of science and technology is one of the most conspicuous features of the emerging global culture. Amazingly advanced means of communication and travel developed by modern technology have brought different peoples of the world closer together despite the physical distance which separates them. What happens in one part of the globe is no longer an isolated happening. The international community is in some way drawn into all major moral, political, economic and social issues that concern any particular nation in the world today. Science and technology, in their present phase of development, are primarily contributions of the Western world. Science has had a universally felt effect on people's beliefs, while technology has made available to man very effective means of doing or producing whatever man desires or needs. As a consequence it has become necessary to have a fresh look at traditional values. It has become necessary not only to reconsider our traditional values but also to raise new value issues in the context of contemporary scientific and technological development. A case in point is the recently felt need for a system of environmental ethics. Another relevant example would be the range of new moral issues that have arisen in the sphere of medicine, such as the moral problems relating to abortion and euthanasia, surrogate motherhood, methods of family planning, population control and organ transplantation. Scientific beliefs may sometimes be a challenge to traditional values in so far as traditional values are based on beliefs which are not in conformity with those of science. In the Western context, the advancement of scientific beliefs took place amidst considerable conflict and

*Buddhist Values in the Emerging Global Culture* X9

cherished social traditions. In the *Kasibharadvaja-sutta* we find the Buddha visiting the workplace of the farmer Kasibharadvaja and begging for food

according to the usual practice of the Buddhist recluses. Kasibharadvaja's immediate reaction was that he, being a farmer, produces his own food by sowing and harvesting. He wants the Buddha also to do likewise. But the Buddha then points out that he was also doing a kind of cultivation, the produce of which was immortality. The Buddha compares his spiritual qualities with the material implements used by an ordinary farmer and shows that his own pursuit is far superior to the pursuit of an ordinary farmer.<sup>3</sup> Those who were concerned purely with materialist values regarded the life of the Buddhist recluse as given to idleness. But the Buddhists traditionally responded to this view by maintaining that the pursuit involved much more effort than the life of an ordinary person. Their task was one of cleansing the self of greed and hatred. According to the Buddhist value system, among all human actions those that involve the elimination of greed, hatred and delusion have the greatest value.<sup>4</sup> It is on account of this consideration that the *bhikkhu* commands great respect in a Buddhist community. The Buddhist recluse is called a *bhikkhu*, because he begs his food and other requisites from the lay community (Pali/Sanskrit, *piṇḍapala*). Providing alms and gifts to the recluses is considered one of the foremost acts of merit for the lay people. This practice was meant to be an effective device to establish a relationship between the lay Buddhist devotees (Pali/Sanskrit, *upasaka*) and the men who engaged themselves purely in the endeavour of attaining the goal of moral perfection. In the early period of Buddhism the Buddhist monk maintained a distance from the lay community with respect to other social involvements such as participation in the social, political and economic life of the people. Their function was to provide moral and spiritual inspiration to the lay community, to give them general moral direction regarding the necessity of a moral and spiritual foundation for good and satisfactory living. This relationship has broken down considerably in the traditional Buddhist societies today. The Buddhist monk has to a great extent lost his role of giving moral direction to society. The value crisis of traditional Buddhist societies like that of Sri Lanka is attributable to a great extent to the weakening of the wholesome relationship that was maintained between the spiritual community and the lay community.

*Nibbana* according to Buddhism is not a life in heaven after death, but absolute peace of mind attained here and now by the eradication of all unwholesome and evil roots of human behaviour. *Nibbana*, as conceived in the most authoritative literature of Theravada Buddhism, is not a metaphysical being, but the radical transformation of personality leading to inner peace and

<sup>3</sup> *Sutta-nipitā*.

<sup>4</sup> *Thera-gāthā*.

90 P. D. Premasiri

tranquillity. This inner peace and tranquillity was considered to be attainable in this very life by every individual with sufficient spiritual zeal and commitment by eradicating all the unwholesome psychological traits. The roots of unwholesome and evil behaviour are greed, hatred and delusion. The Buddhist recluse is expected to consider the eradication of these unwholesome roots of motivation and behaviour as to be his immediate goal. According to the Buddhist tradition this supreme goal of eradication of unwholesome character traits was actually attained by numerous disciples of the Buddha, and it is believed that at least in theory, it is an attainable goal even today, provided the requirements of the path are adequately fulfilled. It is not to be conceived as a metaphysical goal because even someone's claim to have attained it is considered to be open to test and verification. The goal as defined involves a radical transformation of personality involving the eradication of unwholesome emotions. If anyone claims to have attained it, that person could be subjected to rigorous testing by observing that person's behaviour.

The pursuit of *Nibbana* as the supreme goal implies that Buddhism values a society in which greed, hatred and ignorance are reduced. The Buddhist practice does not involve the worship of any sectarian God. Its supreme values are the cultivation of wholesome qualities of mind that are opposed to greed, hatred and delusion. Moral evil, according to Buddhism, is an expression of these roots of unwholesome behaviour (Pali, *akusala-miṭṭhā*; Sanskrit, *akusala-miṭṭhā*). They should be replaced by non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. Expressed in more positive terms, greed has to be replaced by charitableness and generosity, hatred by love and compassion and ignorance or delusion by understanding or wisdom. These Buddhist values can be seen to be even more relevant to the

world which has undergone the contemporary form of scientific and technological transformation than they were during the time of the Buddha. Materialistically biased programmes of development have undoubtedly produced much material wealth in the societies of the materially developed world. The problem of poverty has been overcome to a considerable extent in such societies. However, the pursuit of material values alone without due consideration for moral and spiritual values has created new problems for mankind. The wasteful and consumerist culture which has resulted from laying no limits to the desire for the production and consumption of material goods has done considerable damage to man's natural environment. Western lifestyles have also resulted in unhealthy competition for the limited resources that nature could afford, leading to the consequence of mutual hatred and enmity between people and nations. Technology has provided the means to produce highly destructive weapons of war which are utilized all over the world in major as well as in minor conflicts. Violent conflicts between dissentient groups are common throughout the world and the misery produced in these violent conflicts to persons actively engaged in those conflicts as well as to ordinary bystanders has grown to enormous proportions. Production and sale of

*Buddhist Values in the Emerging Global Culture* 91

destructive weapons is one of the leading commercial enterprises in the contemporary world. A lifestyle which is described in Buddhist terms as one of sense indulgence (Pali/Sanskrit, *kiima-sukhallikadnyoga*), and given a negative value in Buddhism as low (Pali/Sanskrit, *hina*), vulgar (Pali, *gamma*; Sanskrit, *gramya*) and ignoble (Pali, *anariya*; Sanskrit, *aniirya*) is being increasingly adopted by the contemporary generation. The diminishing returns that such a lifestyle eventually brings result in boredom, and depression creating the impulse for deviant forms of behaviour. Placing a greater value on sense pleasures has resulted in the loosening of traditional family bonds. The parental care that is necessary for the children in their early years of mental growth is deprived to them as a result of broken families. The increasing addiction to mentally and physically debilitating alcohol and drugs is becoming a means of overcoming the frustrations resulting from the so-called affluent lifestyles of contemporary youth.

From the Buddhist point of view, the contemporary crisis is none other than a crisis in the sphere of values. The attempt to restore religion in order to overcome the crisis has not in any way produced the desired results, for religious ideologies have the tendency to create situations of conflict based on sectarian identities. Despite the Buddha's warning that his teaching should not be used to exalt oneself and to disparage others and that it should be handled in the way a watersnake should be handled, instances are common when this warning has been disregarded even by those who claim to be Buddhists. Buddhism rejects dogmatism and recommends that the teaching should be used as a raft to cross over to the safety of *nibbiina*.<sup>5</sup> Tolerance of other faiths is one of the cardinal virtues of Buddhism. The Buddha insisted that his mission was not motivated by the desire for acquiring a bigger following for himself, but it was motivated by a desire for a radical moral transformation of people conducive to their welfare and happiness.<sup>11</sup> The Buddha never advocated the use of force, or other methods of persuasion for winning converts. The only method he used was an appeal to people's conscience, insight and understanding.

Authoritarian methods which externally impose political, economic, social and other institutional structures are according to the teachings of Buddhism incapable of bringing about any lasting change which is wholesome and desirable in society. In the contemporary context the need is not sectarian proselytizing which tends to take the form of a new religious imperialism. Sectarian approaches need to be replaced by a genuine desire for the search of a universal spirituality. In this search the values inherent in any spiritual tradition could be subjected to critical scrutiny, as the Buddha pointed out in the *Kiiliimasutta*. Certain values could be universally adopted after such scrutiny without

<sup>5</sup> *Maiihima-ni* (//*lya*, Vol. I.

<sup>11</sup> *Digha-ni* (//*lya*, ed. T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids and I. E. Carpenter, London: PTS, Vols. I, II, 111-IR90, 1903, 1911. u

<sup>92</sup> P. D. Premasiri

leaving room for dogmatism, bias and sectarian prejudice. In such an enterprise a close scrutiny of the Buddhist value system could be very rewarding. The Buddha's philosophy of the Middle Way has a universal and timeless

relevance. Although the teaching of the Middle Way was presented to counter the two extreme lifestyles that were prevalent during the Buddha's time, its implications for contemporary society cannot be underestimated. In the Buddha's doctrine of the Middle Way he shows that a life of sensuality and a life of asceticism are both unrewarding. A human being is a complex of mind and matter (Piili/Sanskrit, *niima-rupa* and Piili, *viiiina*; Sanskrit, *vijiiina*) and has material as well as moral, emotional and spiritual needs. Man's spiritual potential could be developed only within a material environment in which his basic material needs are looked after. Buddhism does not encourage poverty for its own sake. The Buddhist layman is encouraged to produce wealth by righteous means. Those who opt to pursue the pure life of spirituality and devote all their effort and endeavour to attain moral perfection or sainthood (Piili, *arahatta*; Sanskrit, *arhattva*) are to be provided with their material needs by the lay people. The spiritual community is expected to live exemplary lives, demonstrating in practice that the good and contented life does not consist of the yearning and thirsting for more and more sensuous gratification, but in the life of the mind, the cultivation of wholesome qualities which are conducive to contentment, inner peace and joy. Such people who attain the culmination of worthiness (*arahatta*) and become free from all bonds and prejudices, lay aside all dogmas, and become most capable of providing moral direction and guidance to the lay community with perfect equanimity.

Buddhism condemns an attitude which promotes servility to material riches. The miserly attachment to material riches, that leads to the hoarding of wealth, can lead to the growth of social disparities and result in situations of conflict due to the opposition between miserliness and jealousy (Piili, *issii-macchariya*; Sanskrit, *ir\$yii-miitsaryaf*). Production of material wealth without due regard to the righteousness of the means by which wealth is produced is condemned. One of the most important factors of the Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism is 'right means of livelihood' (Piili, *sammii-ijjiva*; Sanskrit, *samyag-ijjiva*). Ernst Friedrich Schumacher asserts that the inclusion of right livelihood in the Buddhist Eightfold Path implies a Buddhist economics.<sup>x</sup> It implies an economics based on moral values. Buddhism gives priority to moral value over economic value mainly because according to Buddhism, material progress without a moral foundation is considered to be self-defeating. The economic achievements of a person are, from the Buddhist point of view, not worth even a

<sup>7</sup> See *Digha-nikaya* Vol. II. p. 277 for its account of the origin of social conflicts. See also Vol. III, pp. 59 f. and I, pp. 134 f. for its account of social unrest and moral degradation of society as a consequence of economic disparities.

x E. F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful*, New York: Harper and Row, 1975 p. 30.

*Buddhist Values in the Emerging Global Culture* 93

sixteenth part of a person's moral achievements.~ A person who has the vision only to achieve material progress is like a one-eyed person. One can be said to have unimpaired vision in both eyes only if one has the vision to achieve material progress as well as moral development. <sup>iii</sup> Some trades, such as the trade in weapons (Pali, *sattha-vmJijja*; Sanskrit, *:\$astra-valJijya*), the trade in poisons that cause harm to life (Pali, *visa-valJijja*; Sanskrit, *vifta-ValJijya*) and the trade in intoxicating substances (Pali, *majja-valJijja*; Sanskrit, *madya-valJijya*), are specially identified in Buddhism as falling into the category of wrong means of livelihood. We see that, despite the damage that is increasingly being done to human life by these trades, they go on unimpeded. This is because priority is given to monetary value over moral value.

The ecological crisis which is being experienced today as a global phenomenon is a creation of Western science and technology. It is becoming increasingly clear that more science and more technology is not going to get us out of this crisis. Some Western thinkers have expressed the view that the present ecological crisis has its historical roots in traditional Western attitudes towards nature. It has also been pointed out that Eastern values promote a greater sense of respect, care and concern for nature. Roderic Nash, for instance, says in a classic of environmental history:

Ancient Eastern cultures were the sources of respect for and religious veneration of the natural world... As early as the eighth century B.C. the Indian philosophy of Jainism proposed that man not kill or harm any living creature... Early Buddhists and

Hindus professed a feeling of compassion and a code of ethical conduct for all that was alive. II

Such thinkers maintain that principles for sound environmental ethics could be derived from the moral teachings of Buddhism. In the early Buddhist canonical *suttas* (Sanskrit, *śūtra*) it was held that, when the morality of rulers becomes decadent, the natural environment also gets affected and winds would not blow properly, and rains would not come in due season.<sup>12</sup> Buddhism transcends the anthropocentric value system of the Western world. According to the ethics of love and compassion in Buddhism all forms of sentient beings are required to be treated with care and concern. Buddhism considers contentment as the greatest wealth that man can acquire (Pali, *santutthi paramam dhanam*; Sanskrit, *santufi!hi paramam dhanam*). In a world of limited resources the only alternative for the survival of mankind is to reduce wants. The consumerist culture tends to turn more and more wants into needs. The greed reduction

<sup>9</sup>*Aizguttara-nikāya*, Vol. II. 70.

<sup>11</sup>*Aizguttara-nikāya*, Vol. I. 128.

<sup>12</sup>Quoted by I. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought*, State University of New York Press 1989, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup>*Aizguttara-nikāya*, Vol. II. 75. 0

<sup>14</sup>P. D. Premasiri

ethics of Buddhism becomes relevant in this context. If resources are limited, mutual jealousy and enmity in society could be removed only by the willingness to share the available resources on a reasonable principle of just distribution. Such a principle cannot be successfully imposed by external regulations. There has to be a method of overcoming the limited sympathies of mankind. Therefore inner discipline and cultivation of the Buddhist virtues of loving kindness (Pali, *metta*; Sanskrit, *maitra*), compassion (Pali/Sanskrit, *karuṇā*) sympathetic joy (Pali/Sanskrit, *mudita*) and equanimity (Pali, *upekkha*; Sanskrit, *upekḥ;a*) and the expression of these virtues in positive human action in the form of charitable acts (Pali/Sanskrit, *dāna*), endearing speech (Pali, *piya-vacana*; Sanskrit, *priyavacana*), acts conducive to general welfare (Pali, *attha-cariya*; Sanskrit, *arthacarya*) and recognition of the interests of others as important as one's own interests in one's relationship with other beings (Pali, *samanattata*; Sanskrit, *\*samanarthata / \*samanatmata*) become necessary.

The modern rush for development in the so-called developing countries tend to adopt uncritically alien values which have the tendency in the long run to produce self-defeating consequences. Short-sighted economic policies which ignore the cultural roots and value bases of a society are indeed more harmful than beneficial. In the Sri Lankan context, for instance, the promotion of certain occupations which are considered to be wrong means of livelihood according to the Buddhist system of values among traditional Buddhist communities can result in the destruction of their entire value system. Concerned Buddhist groups have often objected against the promotion of economic activities such as the introduction of piggeries, the development of poultry farming and the creation of inland fisheries in the midst of predominantly Buddhist communities. The Buddhist virtue of nonviolence and care and concern for other forms of life have to be sacrificed in the interests of economic benefit in adopting occupations. The long term consequences of this are extremely damaging to the value basis of a community. Besides, care and concern for nature and the recognition of the importance of maintaining the ecological balance should elevate the Buddhist virtue of nonviolence into a universally valid ethic.

Material science has promoted a totally mechanistic view of life. Such an outlook on life has become part of the contemporary global culture. Human failings are accounted for not in terms of some inner moral weakness over which the individual is capable of acquiring mastery, but purely in terms of external factors. Attention is directed entirely on changes to be brought about in the external environment while no attempt is made to change the inner nature of the individual. The Buddhist approach in this connection is different. While recognizing the influences of the external material environment on human behaviour, Buddhism lays more emphasis on the human capacity to train and educate the human will. Buddhism does not rest content with blaming all human failings on the material environment. Man is not merely a machine. Man has the potential to master the influences of the environment by training the will. Man

has to take responsibility in a very important way for his predicament. The mechanistic view of human behaviour promoted by science has failed to create this sense of individual moral responsibility. Buddhist morality does not allow one to shirk one's responsibility for one's behaviour by blaming it upon any material or ideal, natural or supernatural factor external to oneself. This is why Buddhism insists that there is no other way out of human suffering, both individual and social, than by means of the culture of the human mind. Science and technology have no doubt been able to revolutionize man's living conditions on earth. In a sense man has been able to conquer nature. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that this conquest of nature is likely to bring about the final defeat of mankind on earth, unless the newly acquired powers of mankind are guided by wisdom. Man has been able to conquer nature, but has not been able to conquer himself. Buddhism prescribes a very clearly laid-out path for this self-conquest. The above discussion was an attempt to highlight some of the elements of wisdom contained in the Buddhist value system. The Buddhist value system is meant to develop a human civilization in which greed, hatred and ignorance are minimized. Compassion and wisdom are the foremost values of Buddhism. The need for such a value system for the survival of life on earth is felt today more than ever before.