

THE WAY OF BUDDHISM

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As human beings we are blessed with a precious human body, whose faculties are rare among sentient beings. Human life is also rare numerically speaking: we cannot imagine how many millions of tiny insects may exist underneath the area one human covers.

Let me now go into the Tibetan way of perceiving human life.

In Tibetan Buddhist scriptures, human life is referred to as precious. This is because it has special powers of accomplishment. One often comes across mention of three things in the context of human life: the body, the enjoyment and virtuous roots. We offer these to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha in the mandala-offering practice. We are also expected to dedicate these to the well-being of sentient and non-sentient beings.

The body refers not only to the biological body but to the whole psycho-physical existence of human life. The capacity or skill of humans takes both positive and negative forms. On the positive side, we can achieve immense benefits to ourselves and to fellow humans through the wonders of science and technology. The negative capacity is still more striking. One person may burn a whole country by spreading hatred towards other sections of people; one single madman may embroil a whole region by burning the sacred book of a religion.

When we look at the animal kingdom, some creatures may seem, in some ways, more skillful than humans. Without any instruments, they build such beautiful nests, and they know how to protect their near and dear ones from various dangers. Yet we humans have learned to create much more wonderful things. It is the evolution of geo-physical and intellectual culture that is not known in non-human sentient realms.

The main capacity of human beings lies in the discriminating power: between good and bad for oneself, between good and bad for others. Similarly, between good and bad in the short term on one hand, and good and bad in the long term on the other. This faculty is called in Sanskrit *vivekavigyam*.

Enjoyments refer to the objects of enjoyment required in life. A Buddhist scripture says clearly, “happiness in human life is not possible without material requirements”. In the same line it says “the satisfaction of requirements come from generous activities.” It does not say requirements can be attained by aggressive efforts. If you get something it becomes your responsibility to give something back to its source’s sentient or non-sentient. Material attainments, money, property and so on, if they have come to you by your honest efforts, it is well within the realm of “right livelihood.”

The phrase “generous activities” may be seen as covering not only the giving of material substances but also the exchange of material and other things beneficial to others” so it is a give and take idea. Basically, it refers to the “non-attachment” aspect of spiritualism. Non-attachment rises from “renunciation”. From the term “renunciation” one may get the idea that you must first leave society, leave your family and go somewhere else, instead of starting from where you are. Well, if you look at the life of the Buddha, he was a prince, and, after seeing

certain things in the capital of his kingdom, he left the palace and became a wanderer and spent a long time in solitude in the forest. There are so many similar stories about great saints in Tibet as well, such as the well-known stories of Milarepa. These demonstrate to us the extent to which one can go if one develops a strong determination. This does not mean that when we start practicing renunciation, we have to abandon everything, because if you are not one hundred per cent ready from within, even if you go to a solitary place, it may not be renunciation from within. You may be staying apart from people physically, but if your mind is occupied with worldly things it is not renunciation. So, renunciation has to take deep roots in the mind through sustained meditation and reflection on the whole predicament of cyclic existence.

The practice of generous activity may also be done mentally. For example, many Tibetan practitioners, both lamas and laypeople, carry out a daily morning ritual called chutor, or “scattering water” to the hungry and thirsty ghosts. The ritual involves pouring sanctified water from one pot to another along with balls of barley flour. The practitioner imagines spirits gathering around to share the food and water, and also receives spiritual messages from the Buddha’s teachings. One can accuse Tibetan practitioners of being generous to invisible spirits but not so generous to needy fellow humans. Well, that is certainly a point, but on the other hand there is also a valid point that when throwing some coins to a beggar in the street you should not feel superior in some way to the beggar. As long as we live in the human realm, we should be engaged in generous activities, and should at the same time be pragmatic, instead of following fixed theories, ideas or rules.

- 1) Renouncing selfish desire, the focus of Buddha’s first Sermon at Sarnath.
- 2) Loving-kindness towards all, the message from the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma at Vaishali and other places.
- 3) The power of the special insight into Emptiness, the direct teaching contained in the second sermon delivered at Rajgir near Nalanda (Bihar)

And the very basis of roots of virtues is the pure nature of the mind.

The elaborate ceremonies associated with various tantric rituals, and the ritual arrangement of implements and paintings, mudras and dance, are meant as an aid to understanding and imbibing the teaching of the Buddha. They are not to be mistaken for the essentials.

From all we have said, the points to be noted are: renunciation is necessary, but does not imply denunciation of worldly life; loving-kindness is a must, while pretentiousness must be abandoned; special insight is the most important of the roots of virtues, and can never be accompanied by showmanship.

I must close by paying tribute to how Prof. Darrol Bryant has, over the many years of his work in inter-religious dialogue, developed a special skill for pinpointing the essentials of the religious cultures of the world and evolving these into practical projects. I always have considered him a model blend of noble human and spiritual qualities.