

# Human Dignity in Buddhism

By

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Let us try to ascertain to what extent we are able to discuss, from the Buddhist point of view, that which is relevant to this simple and yet sometimes confusing subject touching on human dignity.

What are the humane qualities which give rise to dignity and nobility? They are based on the moral, ethical, intellectual and spiritual norms which we human beings uphold and treasure in our day-to-day relationships with one another. As human beings we have minds which we can develop to such an extent that we can differentiate between what is right and what is wrong, between what we should be proud of and what we should be ashamed of. These are humane qualities that we all cherish as human beings. It is in cherishing such values that we distinguish ourselves as human beings and not animals.

The word '*manussa*' as indicated in our religious books, describes a human being as "one who can develop his mind". To be able to develop one's mind means that one is able to develop and sustain one's thinking power which is the ability to judge between what is ethical and what is unethical, what is moral and immoral, what is good and what is bad and what is right and what is wrong. These are attributes within the grasp of human beings. Animals do not have such attributes – animals act by instinct. It would appear that human beings are the only living beings that can develop their minds or their thinking power to such high levels – even to the extent of attaining Buddhahood.

Before the advent of world religions, human beings were guided by two valuable factors, which in primitive times, contributed to the upholding of the dignity of man. The two factors are "*Hiri*" and "*Ottappa*" in Pali which are translated as "Shame" and "Fear". These two factors, shame and fear, invariably govern all actions of mankind, thus differentiating the actions of human beings from those of animals. However, when human beings fail to maintain the two important factors of Shame and Fear —when they succumb to the evil effects of drugs, liquor, lust, anger, greed, envy, selfishness and hate, they lose their balance and they deny themselves the right to human dignity. Without Shame and Fear, human beings are no better than animals.

Human beings have advanced very far indeed on the evolutionary ladder. They have achieved phenomenal successes scientifically, psychologically and materially. There are now innumerable religious practices, customs, traditions, rites and rituals, offerings and prayers in all forms.

While we pride ourselves as civilised human beings, we note with deep regret the behaviour and attitudes of some of our people which can be described as no better than those of animals. This is certainly not a development that we want to encourage for mankind. A human being who is worthy of respect, would be one who has the attributes of Fear and Shame, who is kind, compassionate and sympathetic to others, who is afraid to cause harm to others but is ever prepared to lend a helping hand when in need. These are ordinary human values which we should all cherish and uphold. We should develop our humane qualities and not violate them. By being of service to others, we develop great virtues which are inherent in us. By being of service to others, we show a spirit of understanding, kindness, compassion, honesty, simplicity, gentleness, humility and contentment. These are worthy human values which we should be proud to acquire.

There are certain characteristics in our human nature which we have to guard and nurture carefully into useful human values. Roughly speaking, these characteristics are divided into three aspects, our *animal* nature, our *human* nature and our *divine* nature. These three characteristics influence our behaviour in various degrees. If we give way to our *animal nature* without making any effort to subdue or control our ugly actions, we will become a liability to society. Religion is an important tool which can help us to control our animal nature. Religion, with the noble teachings coming from illustrious religious leaders, should serve as a guide for proper humane behaviour. Religion also serves as a tool for us to cultivate, nurture and improve on the various aspects of our hidden *human nature*. By cultivating and improving our human nature, we ultimately achieve our divine goal – we attain our *divine nature*. By achieving divine nature, we achieve the level of development at which the base emotions of greed, lust, anger, hatred, jealousy, envy and other unwelcome attributes are completely eliminated, thus making the human being more noble and worthy of the highest respect. With the help of religion, we control and subdue our animal nature, we cultivate and improve our human nature, and we achieve our divine nature.

This divine nature depends on the development of goodwill or friendliness or care for the welfare of others, compassion or kindness, sympathetic joy at others' progress and impartiality towards gain or loss and praise or blame. This is also known as the sublime state.

It is ironical that many religionists are still under the misapprehension that one can achieve one's divine goal by the simple act of praying or worshipping and the simple performance of certain rites and rituals. This is a mistake. This attitude must be changed. We have our duties and obligations to fulfill in order that we may live as real and dignified human beings. We have to cultivate and develop our human nature in order to achieve our divine attributes. We must practise all the human values for the good and well-being of humanity. We must do all the good we can and eradicate all that is evil. The religions of the world have been developed to guide us and show us the correct path to live in peace and harmony. All religions should provide their followers with important and suitable guidelines to enable everyone to live, eat and work together with mutual respect, understanding and dignity. As co-religionists we should all be able to live with one another without harbouring any hatred, jealousy, enmity or feelings of superiority. Buddhism gives us such guidance.

It has been clearly mentioned in the ancient philosophies that the purpose of our life is not just selfish aggrandizement but the noble act of being of service to others – serving humanity. Great and understanding people of the world achieve satisfaction and greatness by being of service to others. By being of service to others, we benefit by the development of our inherent virtues. When we serve others, we serve ourselves. When we relieve others of their sufferings, we enhance our own happiness and tranquility of mind.

## **NATURE OF THE MIND**

Human values originate in human beings – from our own rational minds. It is for this reason that we are described as '*manussa*' – "one who has a mind to think". The word 'man' itself is derived from the Sanskrit word '*Manas*' – meaning one who has a mind to reason. Lord Buddha stated that "Mind is the forerunner of everything in this world" – thus differentiating us who have this faculty from other living beings which do not possess the power to practise rational thought. Other living beings such as animals, do not possess human characteristics – they are unable to reason between what is good

and what is bad, they are unable to philosophize as humans do. Thus human beings are considered as unique in this world. Being unique, man's mind must be properly trained and spiritually guided through the noble teachings of religion, so that the mind can reason and work for the good of humanity rather than causing disasters in this world. The preamble to the 'UNESCO' constitution contains a most significant phrase: *"Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defence of peace must be constructed."* In the human minds originate all the evils in this world, and it is through the proper cultivation of the mind that we can cause all the evils to be eradicated for the good of humanity.

While we are fortunate to be able to cultivate our minds to work intelligently and to serve humanity, there is an unfortunate aspect within our human character that is not found in other living beings, and that is human craftiness or cunningness. The particular trait of human craftiness or cunningness easily overshadows all other important human values. It can be said that practically all the problems, suffering and chaotic conditions prevailing in this world, are the results of human selfishness, cunningness or crookedness – a trait that is extremely difficult to eradicate. If man is given complete freedom to behave according to his own desires, he may even destroy the whole world within a short spell. Man, through his new discoveries, has become so dangerous that even his very existence has been called into doubt. However, religion should play an important part in diverting the human being away from these unfortunate traits of craftiness or cunningness. Religion, with its noble precepts working for the spiritual upliftment of human beings, and the eradication of all evil, should serve as a compass to guide the human mind on to the path of peace and tranquility for the good and well-being of all. Buddhism, in common with other religions, strives to eradicate all evil and works for the well-being of humanity.

The main purpose of Buddhism is to encourage the moral and ethical development of the ordinary human being through mental training and conditioning so that the human mind can be a definite asset to the cause of humanity. Buddhism works for the good of man. Buddhism does not believe that a Buddhist can achieve his aims in life by the simple process of praying or worshipping, and making offerings and supplication to the Buddha. Buddhism teaches that a man must work hard for his own progress and advancement. He cannot expect good results from the mere act of praying for it – he must strive for it. Success will only come to those who strive and not to those who just hope for success. According to the Buddha, the most valuable asset for a man is his ability to cultivate and nurture his mind to achieve wisdom. This is the foundation of Buddhism. Real human values can be found amongst those who have developed their minds to the fullest extent in accordance with the Teachings of the Buddha. Unfortunately for many of us, our minds are deluded, clouded by ignorance and selfishness, even though all of us have the ability to attain the ultimate – the divine nature. Because of delusion, certain defilements such as anger, jealousy and hatred exist within us. These mental defilements act as hindrances to our enlightenment with the result that we are unable to realize the real human values inherent in us.

## **DO IT YOURSELF**

The Buddha did not encourage his followers to rely on a third party to gain salvation. The Buddha said that even He could only show the way to salvation and that His followers should "Cultivate their own moral background, train and purify their minds in order to gain wisdom and ultimate salvation". The Buddha has repeatedly stressed that enlightenment cannot be achieved through external agencies. We must work for it. We must use our own efforts, knowledge and understanding to experience it. To this extent,

the Buddha gave credit for our human intelligence. The Buddha even stressed that His followers should not accept His Teachings merely by thinking that "The Buddha is a great man". People who do not make a personal effort to gain the requisite wisdom are equated to a spoon which carries the soup but does not know what it tastes like. We have to use our common sense and develop our understanding through our own reasoning. Only by this means can we realise the truth or the reality of existence. The advice given by the Buddha in the "Kalama Sutta" indicated very clearly the extent to which the Buddha encouraged men to think for themselves and to value their human dignity. The Buddha said "Do not accept anything based upon mere report or tradition or hearsay; nor upon emotional reasons and arguments; nor upon one's own inference; nor upon anything which appears to be true; nor upon one's own speculative opinion; nor upon the consideration 'this is our Teacher'. But when you know these things are good for you and for others, then accept them".

It is doubtful if any other religious leader had ever stated so clearly and precisely that no one must accept any teaching from anybody without first intelligently examining it with a critical mind. It was the Buddha who was willing to give credit to the human being as being capable of such rational thought.

One cannot gain realisation or salvation for oneself from another person. The other person, even though he may be a Buddha, can only provide ideas and views, showing the path for one to follow. One has to think for oneself and find out the truth individually by one's own personal effort. No one can transfer the truth to another person. However, no one is expected to find all the solutions immediately. The process of searching for the Truth will be a long one. One must persevere with faith, confidence and diligence, over a period of time before the truth will dawn on oneself.

### **LEAD A NORMAL LIFE AND BE HAPPY**

In explaining the teachings of the Buddha, certain people have unfortunately created a wrong impression that the Buddha had advised all His followers to give up all worldly possessions and lead an unprofitable life without the necessity of either working or earning a living and without experiencing any form of worldly pleasure. (Such a view has gained currency amongst quite a number of people who are under a complete misapprehension about the Buddha's teachings). On the other hand we must understand that renunciation is the most important aspect to have peace of mind. But that should be done through the realisation of the fleeting nature of worldly pleasures. Instead of advising His followers to lead an inactive life without doing any form of work, the Buddha, in His discourse on the 'Four Kinds of Happiness' which man can experience, clearly indicated that man must work hard in order to acquire wealth and property to lead a happy Buddhist way of life.

The first kind of happiness comes when a man, by his hard work and strenuous efforts, has managed to accumulate some wealth or landed property. The acquisition of such wealth and property, for the well-being of the family, is encouraged by the Buddha. This attitude gives the view that a man should not have worldly possessions.

A second kind of happiness is the pleasureable experience gained by man in his ability to spend or make use of his hard-earned wealth for his own benefit and that of his family. The man enjoys life without in any way violating religious principles or causing harm to others. This is considered by the Buddha as part of a Buddhist way of life and it is contrary to certain erroneous views that a man should not have worldly possessions. Of course when one decides to renounce the world and become a monk, then he gives

up all his worldly possessions. But the Buddha did not suggest that ordinary laymen do the same thing.

A third kind of happiness is the happiness experienced by a man who is completely free from debt. The Buddha also advised that a man must know how to adjust his expenditure in accordance with his income. A man should not be dependent on others for his daily sustenance – except in emergencies.

The fourth kind of happiness, considered as the highest level of happiness, is the realisation by a man that he has been able to earn and accumulate his wealth and property without in any way causing harm or injury to others. Such happiness is deemed by the Buddha to be a remarkable experience during this life or hereafter.

These various types of happiness were described in certain discourses uttered by the Buddha in regard to the economic life of a man. Hence such views are definitely contrary to the misconceptions held that man should not lead a worldly life. The Buddha even advised his followers to be careful in looking after their hard-earned wealth, to be frugal and to lay something for a rainy day. It is clear therefore that the Buddha certainly did not want *everybody* to discard their worldly lives and retire to the jungle for meditation.

The rules to develop human values in Buddhism are simple. One must work hard and be conscientious. One must not waste one's time unnecessarily, idling away and doing nothing. Even regarding sleep, one must be rational by keeping it to the minimum necessary for health. One should not give lame excuses that either the day is too hot or too cold for the allotted work to be done. Be constructive and conscientious in whatever you do. It was recorded that the Buddha Himself was the most energetic and active religious teacher who has ever lived in this world. During His forty five years of noble service to mankind, it was reputed that He only slept for a period of two hours each day. He travelled all over the country advising people how to lead a noble way of life.

Knowing well that there are human frailties and shortcomings, the Buddha advised His followers to be careful in associating with people. One must associate with good people. Certain so-called friends are far from being friends – ever ready to cheat and swindle. A certain Western scholar once concocted a prayer: -- "O Lord, please protect me from my friends. I know how to protect myself from my enemies". The Buddha advised us to understand who our friends are. In associating with people, we must try to understand their character, temperament and mood.

One of the golden rules to lead a good life is to have a balanced livelihood – without in any way going into extremes. The Buddha does not advise us to torture our body or our mind in the cause of religion. We can practise our religion as rational beings. Do not overdo things. Do not forget the most important aspect of life – your spiritual development. The teaching of the Buddha can be categorised in three ways: happiness for this life, happiness for the hereafter and happiness for the ultimate achievement – Nibbana. In the pursuit of these three kinds of happiness, a man can achieve dignity and nobility.