

IS IT WRONG TO BE AMBITIOUS ?

By

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It is difficult to find human beings who are free from selfish motives. That is the reason why there is conflict and discrimination among human beings. Buddhism teaches us to reduce our cravings or ambition. As we are attached to the world, we want to know whether it is wrong to entertain some ambitions. Is it wrong to become successful in a worldly sense? The ideas that people develop in their minds to become successful doctors, lawyers, engineers, professors, teachers or businessmen are ambitions. Some Buddhists have asked, 'If Buddhism advocates renunciation, then should Buddhists turn their backs on material success?' Nobody in this world can say that such ambitions are wrong or contrary to Buddhism.

Advice for Laymen

Buddhism is misinterpreted and misunderstood by many people. The Buddha clearly recognized two classes of people: those who had renounced the world and those who chose to follow the life of householders. Certain precepts and observances that the Buddha prescribed are specifically meant for those who have renounced the worldly life. Some people have mixed these with the precepts meant for householders. For those who have renounced the worldly life, there is one way to develop selfless ambition. For those who are still attached to the world as householders, there is another way. For instance, during the Buddha's time, many rich people who enjoyed their mundane pleasures approached the Buddha, and told Him that it was difficult for them to renounce the world. They had worldly commitments, family obligations and many other duties to fulfil. So they requested the Buddha to lay down a suitable religious way of life for them to practise. The Buddha did not ridicule them; for He knew that not everyone was ready to give up worldly pleasures.

Knowing the complex situation of the household life, the Buddha spoke of total renunciation for the life of a monk or nun as the only way for a religious life. He gave householders suitable guidelines to lead a religious life while tending to their normal occupations. The Teacher who had renounced absolutely everything for His own Enlightenment knew the nature of worldly attachment. Renunciation must only be undertaken when realisation appears in the mind. Otherwise, there will be feelings of disappointment or frustration. Those who make a premature renunciation may return to the lay life. So we have to wait until such realisation appears in our mind.

The Buddha's Advice for Householders

The first happiness *atthi-sukha* is to enjoy the economic security of wealth acquired by just and righteous means; the second *bhoga-sukha* is spending that wealth liberally on oneself, one's family, friends and relatives, and on meritorious deeds; the third *anana-sukha* is to be free from debts; the fourth happiness *anavajja-sukha* is to live a faultless and pure and blameless life committing no evil in thought, word or deed. When you come to know that you have earned something honestly, the happiness that you gain through your accumulated wealth develops confidence in the household life. Some people who go on earning and accumulating wealth neither experience happiness nor

use wealth in a proper way. According to the Buddha, we can experience worldly happiness by using what we have earned in a reasonable way, following basic religious principles. It is not correct to say that Buddhists should not experience worldly happiness. Certain harmless cultural amusements and entertainments relax the mind and help reduce tension. Human emotions can be satisfied without disturbing the peace and happiness of others. Many cultural performances in Asia actually developed through the influence of Buddhism.

Mental Development

When people reach a certain level of spiritual development and see the real nature of worldly life, they will give up even such entertainments. They realise that ultimately, life is nothing but a dream and that worldly pleasures are of a fleeting nature. The three characteristics of every existing component thing: *Anicca, Dukkha and Anatta* - impermanance, unsatisfactoriness and insubstantiality - can be understood clearly through insight. By insight we mean a realisation of the ultimate truth which appears when a person has trained his mind to see the real nature of existence.

Some people say the Buddhism is responsible for certain countries being undeveloped and backward. They also say that Buddhism always draws attention to suffering and insists that people give up the worldly life to sit in a forest to meditate. It is for this reason that Westerners in the past have treated Buddhism as a 'pessimistic religion'. It is true that Buddhism emphasizes the unsatisfactoriness of life. But this does not make it pessimistic. In the same way, we cannot call a doctor who tells a patient that he is dying of cancer 'pessimistic'. A religion is pessimistic if it simply says life is miserable. But in Buddhism, clear teachings are offered on how to become happy and contented.

Middle Path

The Buddha was the most active and energetic religious teacher. He advised people to use their skills and knowledge in their daily life. A Buddhist should not lead a lazy and easy life and blame it on Buddhism for any of his/her failures. A good Buddhist has the quality of **VIRIYA** - energy. Buddhists must strive for perfection. They must not delay doing something by finding excuses like it is too hot or it is too cold. The Buddha's advice to lay people was not to go to either extremes of sensual pleasure or self torture to practise a religion. Everyone must try to lead a happy, harmless and peaceful life. Buddhism is known as the Middle Path.

It is true, however, that the household life can easily influence you to violate some religious principles when temptation, needs and irritation are aroused. You may come across certain difficulties in your daily life as householders. You find it difficult to maintain absolute honesty, kindness and tolerance. It is also true that few can become perfect religious persons in the household life. Your responsibilities, obligations and duties can disturb your mind. They provoke you to do certain things which go against your conscience. If you try to be a religious fanatic as a lay person, your attitude may not appeal to your family members, friends and others. If you follow Buddhist rules which are meant specifically for monks who lead a monastic life, your associates may feel embarrassed; and they may regard you as a nuisance or an eccentric. Therefore, try to lead a sensible life by observing reasonable religious principles. This is how you avoid

becoming a religious fanatic. If you go to extremes, not only will people laugh at you, they will also get a wrong idea of what Buddhism teaches. If you are not fanatical, you can live and work even with other religionists. The Buddha has pointed out that you must know your limit in everything. Try to practise religious principles which are universally accepted. As lay Buddhists, your duty is to lead a normal religious life while fulfilling your family obligations. If you neglect your responsibilities towards your family, you may experience problems. Others may think you as a useless person.

You must know how to adjust your way of life to the country and society you live in without going against the important cultural and traditional practices of the majority, if they are harmless. You should also co-operate with others without behaving as if your religion is the only one that has the right to exist. Buddhism is a religion of freedom. It respects the freedom of other religions. Your common sense and understanding are important in practising a religion.

Nature of Ambition

Every person entertains some kind of ambition. When we refer to the Buddha, He too had an ambition that was implanted in His mind long ago. He continued to develop that ambition, life after life, until He achieved what He wanted. But this ambition is best described as an aspiration. When we read the Buddha's discourses, we can understand how He had worked to reach the goal He aspired to. He has revealed this to us by referring to previous birth stories. He also explained the nature of the great virtues and discipline that He had to cultivate to achieve His aspiration.

When we compare our ambition with the Buddha's aspiration we can see a vast difference. This is because our ambition is primarily based on desire and anxiety bound to worldly pleasure. On the other hand, the Buddha's aspiration was to free Himself from selfishness in order to serve others. We develop our ambition by disturbing others' happiness. That is how we create problems and misery in this world. We are willing to do any kind of evil or wicked deed for our own pleasure. From the Buddhist point of view, this kind of selfish ambition is not justifiable.

What we should constantly strive to do is to develop the higher kind of ambition by working very hard to obtain freedom, happiness and liberation from our existing worldly problems. This ambition is harmless and reasonable. However, this is not the final goal: we must not be satisfied with these temporary mundane ambitions. Our ultimate goal should be freedom from suffering – Nirvana, where all ambition cease and the reality of existence seen.

Rendering Service to Others

While working for our own happiness, freedom and salvation, we have to render some service for the benefit and happiness of others. The Buddha adopted this type of aspiration with deep conviction and boundless compassion. Whilst working for His own salvation, He served others in every possible way. He continued His service to humanity by sacrificing His sensual pleasures, by cultivating all the good qualities and virtues and by eradicating evil thoughts to maintain purity in the mind. This is the way He developed His selfless ambition to gain His enlightenment.

He never cultivated it for His own benefit but for the welfare and liberation of every living being. He developed boundless compassion and wisdom and expressed them by word and deed. But our ambitions, which are selfish in nature, can create much misery. Therefore, we have to learn how to direct our ambitions in such a way as to relieve the suffering of others. Such ambitions are wholesome because they contribute to the greater good of mankind.

Can we live without Craving?

Many people are bothered by this question: if eradication of craving is essential to achieve final liberation, how can we live without craving? It is true that certain necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, transport and medicine are indispensable for our living. At the same time, we have to have income to support our families to fulfil our duties. Attachment to one's husband or wife and children is natural. We should not regard such attachment as irreligious craving. The Buddha did say that craving for existence creates problems, but He did not say that we must torture ourselves and those around us whilst striving to give up craving. In Buddhism, craving itself is not a 'sin' but it creates mental impurities or unskillful action arising from ignorance which delays our spiritual progress. In Buddhism, we develop spirituality in stages. At first we serve those we love in our own family circles. But we must learn to work for the benefit of all humanity. In this way we can refine our human nature to experience the divine nature. The Buddha wanted only to point out the danger of selfish desires. People develop these selfish desires for worldly gain which motivate evil deeds. Our striving for necessities could be decent if we do not develop an undue craving which harms others. Buddhism as well as other religions point out the danger of selfishness.

Eradicating Craving

If selfish desire is harmful, how can we eradicate it? When we have difficulty eradicating craving for own property, we should understand what feelings others have for their own. That is why we observe the precept not to take things which belong to others, to stop craving for others' possessions. When we stop this selfish desire, we allow others to live without any fear about their property. When we become aware of this selfish craving, we should take steps to train our mind to regard all our necessities as impermanent and as mere aids to fulfil our duties. For example, if we have a large amount of money, we should take it as an opportunity to help our fellow beings. Those who do not have money can give their moral support and co-operation for the welfare of others. At this stage, we have to think that we are only custodians of the property which we claim as ours.

If we are unduly attached to material things, we will experience various problems. Fear, insecurity and suspicion will disturb our peace of mind. That is the price we have to pay for clinging to property. Because of this clinging, some people have become insane when they lost their property through natural disaster or theft. Buddhism teaches us not to be so unreasonably attached to material things. After all, we cannot take them away with us when we die.

If we really want to experience peace, the only thing that we can do is to reduce our responsibilities. Try to hand over our possessions to others who are entitled to them; alternatively, donate them to charitable or religious organisations. If we do so, we free

our minds from greed. If we want to develop spiritually, we must be prepared to sacrifice our property for the welfare of others. By this we mean those suffering from poverty and sickness and other calamities. However, this distaste for owing material wealth must come naturally – from true understanding. As we progress spiritually, ignorance gives way to understanding. Then we will freely give up material possessions. This 'renunciation' brings great happiness, because it is accompanied by the wisdom of seeing things as they really are.

Contentment

Those who have not learnt how to maintain contentment while leading a worldly life never get satisfaction. They develop jealousy, suspicion and fear. They experience worry and insecurity. That is why the Buddha says '*Santutthi Paramam Dhanam*' – contentment is the highest wealth. Poor people think rich people are very happy and lucky. They do not know the fear and restlessness that disturb the minds of the wealthy. Many wealthy people experience sleeplessness. A poor man does not experience such problems although he has to face other difficulties. The poor and the rich can only be happy if they feel contented and do not crave for the property of others. In this sense at least, we can say that the poor and the rich are equal.

One day, the Buddha had to sleep in a forest without any shelter during the winter. The next morning when He came out from the forest, He met a prince. The prince asked the Buddha where He was coming from. The Buddha said He was coming from the forest where He had spent the night. When the prince asked whether He had slept happily and peacefully, the Enlightened One said He is one who sleeps peacefully and happily not only one night but every night. Why did He say that? It was because His mind had no worries or disturbances. His mind was always pure. He was free from family problems or property problems. Therefore, He could sleep peacefully. Our minds are not free from problems. That is why we are not happy and find it difficult to sleep peacefully. Attachments give temporary pleasures but ultimately, they disturb our peace of mind.

Emotional Satisfaction

The Buddha did not encourage householders to detach themselves from everything at once. Although He pointed out how attachments can create disappointments. He knew that the life of those whose minds are still defiled, can become very miserable or dull without attachments. This does not mean the Buddha encouraged attachments. He was saying that while we allow ourselves to be attached at a lower stage of our spiritual development, we must discard them at the later stages. When we develop attachments, we have to think about worries and disturbances as natural occurrences. We must strive to be free from attachments and be like the lotus which rises clear from the muddy water. The pleasurable feeling that people get through the five senses to satisfy craving is emotional satisfaction. People regard this as happiness. Although people lay great emphasis on this type of satisfaction, they must be shown that nearly all human problems, corruptions and immoral practices are traceable to this desire for sensual pleasures. True happiness is gained when the mind experiences peace and tranquility. It is impossible to experience this happiness as long as fear, suspicion, and excitement disturb the mind. The ambitions that we develop can create disappointment and frustration if they are of a selfish nature.

Religious knowledge is important to maintain a healthy mental attitude to face unfavourable worldly conditions. When changes and separation take place we must adjust our way of life. It is meaningless to say Buddhism prohibits people from having craving and attachment. Emotional attachments to property, people or ideas carry no formal punishment tags. All that Buddhism does is to explain the repercussions that occur when one becomes a slave to craving and attachment. This is just like a parent advising a child not to play with fire.

People cannot experience worldly pleasures and attachments without paying the price in worry and misery. They must be prepared to accept the consequences if they really want to enjoy the worldly life. Those who are unaware of the consequences will be deeply disappointed. Changed circumstances due to old age and sickness could cancel out these pleasures. People who are not ready to face these problems commit suicide or end up in mental institutions. So do not label Buddhism a pessimistic religion simply because it points out these realities of life! All the Buddha's Teachings show us how to lead meaningful and happy lives by understanding our human nature. Buddhism is the most optimistic of all religions.

Craving for our Physical Body

We have already discussed why we need to reduce our craving and how to do it. We also explained the nature of craving for the property of others as well as our own. If we remove these two types of craving, we will still have craving for our physical body. This craving for self-preservation is intense. Most people are not willing to sacrifice anything from their body for the welfare of others. In their ignorance, they even protect their physical bodies at the cost of the lives of others. But when people come to know the unreal and the impermanent nature of the physical body, they will even go so far as to donate organs from their physical body, By doing so, they will reduce their strong attachment towards the body.

A person who can understand the uncertainty or the impermanence of life would be quite willing to sacrifice even his/her life to save the life of another. To such a person, morality and virtues would be more important than life. This is the way wise people reduce their craving step by step. The main purpose of eradicating craving is to be free from all existing physical and mental suffering.

The Buddha reduced His craving gradually life after life. By cultivating virtues to uproot mental defilements, by sacrificing His worldly pleasures and even giving His own life on numerous occasions. He achieved His goal of Enlightenment to save others from suffering. Great people are willing to sacrifice their lives to relieve others from suffering. To them life is nothing if it is not used to help human beings. Jesus Christ, Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King sacrificed their lives for the sake of others. But their names can never die. The whole world remembers and respects them. Others who have developed selfishness and violated the peace and happiness of mankind are never respected. They are remembered after death only with horror and loathing. Just consider how Stalin and Hitler are regarded today. Real human values lie in our virtues and principles for the betterment of mankind.

Craving for Existence through Rebirth

Although we have reduced attachment to the physical body, we are still not free from craving for existence through rebirth. Some people develop a selfish desire to have a pleasurable permanent existence in heaven or paradise. Some others crave to be born in very rich families to have pleasant worldly life. All these ambitions develop craving. This is alright as a temporary measure, but one day we have to get rid of craving too. Otherwise, we will never gain permanent peace, liberation or salvation.

Today, the whole world has become a battlefield because of selfish desires. Why do people want to harm and swindle others? Why do they want to indulge in immoral activities and illegal practices? It is due to their selfish craving for pleasure. Such actions bring stress to their lives and create suffering.

The belief in immortality is like a candy given to a child to make him forget his toothache. Many people would not be able to accept the awesomeness of life unless they are told there is a pleasurable immortal existence after death. They are fooled into accepting the unsatisfactoriness of the present existence by hoping for an eternal existence in some paradise after death. That is what Karl Marx attacked when he said that **'Religion is the opium of the people.'**

Naturally, foolish people cling to this comforting thought and never try to question the validity of the belief. They do not know the real nature of existence. Sometimes, Buddhists who do not understand the Dhamma fall easy prey to those who talk about eternal happiness in a heaven. When some people tell them of such a place, they succumb to the craving for a fantasy of an eternal life. They must understand that even life in those heavens is not permanent. Only Nirvana is permanent. It is the state where all desires have been completely and permanently eradicated - with no more death or rebirth.

Many people are not ready to accept truth. If the truth is not pleasant to their ears, they refuse to listen. Truth is not pleasant to one who is a slave to sensual pleasures. Truth is natural and unbiased. We will not have disappointment when we realise the universal characteristics of nature. Truth does not bend to our selfish needs. We have to understand truth.

The rounds of rebirth in accordance with karma we create prolong our attachments and craving. Every birth implies decay, sickness and death. This is the unsatisfactory nature of existence and rebirth in any part of the universe. The longer we remain in this cycle of birth and death, the longer will be our suffering. We can never completely satisfy our craving. Satisfying our desire is a losing battle. As soon as we satisfy one desire, we get tired of it and seek fresh ways to satisfy another desire much like drug addiction. The Buddha rejected belief in a immortal life because He knew the real nature of existence. He wanted us to understand the uncertainty of the wheel of existence.

Existence (by birth) is the main cause of all our problems an unhappiness. Simply by entertaining some vague beliefs in an after-life, we will not get what we want. They are figments of the imagination. Universal nature is unchangeable. It does not operate in our favour simply by our wishing it so. We are subject to laws of the universe. Our ignorance of this unbiased law is no excuse for our mistakes. An innocent child may die because of ignorance of the danger of a 'live' electric wire. We cannot argue that he must live

because he was innocent. The cause of his death is ignorance. The cause of our suffering is also ignorance. Only knowledge and wisdom can save us.

The universal law does not operate on hatred, kindness, retribution, revenge or anger. Our duty is to live in accordance with this law if we want to avoid suffering. We cannot change this universal law by worshipping or praying to anyone. This is what the Buddha taught. If we do good, we will get good results; if we do evil, we will be hounded by evil results.

Craving for Non-Existence

Besides craving for material comfort and a happy after-life, people ask how this ambition 'not to exist' can become a craving. The answer lies in frustration or unfulfilled desires. Because of this craving, they try suicide. They believe that there will not be another life hereafter. So long as mental defilements are active, no one can stop 'becoming' or rebirth. If we are not happy with this life, mental purification is the only solution to stop rebirth. Buddhism teaches that we should not confuse ourselves by worrying about existence or non-existence. We should completely calm our minds by always living in the present moment. And in each moment, we must be free from hatred, greed and delusion. This is the secret of real happiness. When the mind is free from all our worldly ambitions, selfish desire or craving, we will be free from all our physical and mental problems. Ambitions must be diverted to serve others as well as ourselves. Such ambitions would mean true liberation from worldly conditions.

Let us remember that Buddhism is not against people having a pleasant life during their existence on this earth. The Buddha preached the middle path. He advocates a gentle and rational way of life which neither punishes by deprivation nor panders by excess.

Buddhism teaches us to be moderate in the enjoyment of sensual pleasures. It encourages the gradual and consistent development of the spiritual life which leads to the destruction of all craving, the root cause of unsatisfactoriness. Buddhists are not expected to become saints overnight. Rather they are shown how to gradually gain final release from the pain of continuous rebirth. The way to do this is to practise Morality *Sila*, Concentration *Samadhi* and Wisdom *Panna*. Even the Fully Enlightened One took innumerable lifetimes to attain his final goal. Buddhism is a practical religion. It should be practised in a gentle and rational way.