

Buddhist Wisdom and Reconciliation

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susukhaṃ vata jīvāma verinesu averino /

verinesu manussesu viharāma averino //

(Dhp. 197)

‘Indeed we live very happily, not hating anyone among those who hate; among men who hate we live without hating anyone.’

The Buddha is said to have uttered this stanza of the *Dhammapada* after having averted a ‘war of water’ (an expression that has become familiar to us nowadays) between his relatives, the Sākiyas and the Koliyas.¹

What is taught in this stanza is forbearance. It was again on the ground that the Buddha had taught forbearance (*khantivāda*) that was achieved by the brahmin Doṇa the reconciliation over the sharing of the relics of the Buddha, as we are told in the *Mahāparinibbānasutta*.²

These incidents show, on the other hand, that it is not easy to obtain reconciliation, requiring as it does the intervention of strong personalities. And we have seen, in our own times, that even strong personalities have not always succeeded in achieving reconciliation, sometimes at the cost of their own lives.

Moreover, one-sided forbearance may lead to indifference and to a situation like the one in which the Buddha’s own people, the Sakyas, found themselves when, in the name of the Buddhist precept of not killing (*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*), they let themselves be killed by the army of furious Viḍūḍabha, rather than killing.³

What is, then, the Buddhist remedy to the various conflicts that afflict us and our world?

There is a unique remedy, and it is to be found in the very heart of the Buddha’s teaching – ‘like an old city buried in the forest’, to use an old Buddhist image. Only, we have to follow the

Dhammapadaḥ † *hakathā* III, pp. 254 ff. References to the Pāli text are in the Pāli Text Society’s editions.

Dīgha-Nikāya II, p. 166.

See L. Schmithausen, ‘Aspects of the Buddhist Attitude towards War’, *Violence Denied*, ed. J. E. M. Houben and K. R. van Kooij (Leiden 1999), p. 49.

Buddha's method, in other words, we have first to identify the cause of these conflicts.

This is not a difficult task. One does not have to be a Buddhist to realize that all our conflicts derive from one source: egoism. Foremost economists have attributed the financial crisis to greed, and greed is but an aspect of egoism. In recent months, we have heard of 'egoism of water'. Egoism is everywhere. It is by egoism that man has killed nature. It is by egoism that stronger nations attack the weaker, rulers kill their own populations ...

A sensitive Buddhist scholar recently wrote, talking about 'Buddhist analysis of the cause of social disharmony and its solutions':

... measures such as removal of economic grievances, diplomatic negotiations and deployment of peacekeeping forces are superficial and temporary solution to the social disharmony ... There can be genuine and real harmony, only if each of the individuals sincerely and honestly apprehends and respects others, free from hatred and attachment.⁴

How could that happen? The Buddha sometimes taught the 'golden rule': There is nothing in the world that is dearer to me than myself, and so is the case with all others. One who wishes one's own good should therefore not harm others:

*sabbā disā anuparigamma cetasā
n' ev' ajjhagā piyataram attanā kvaci /
evaṃ piyo puthu attā paresaṃ
tasmā na hiṃse param attakāmo //5*

But the 'golden rule' has been little followed, and there is no reason to believe that it will be more followed today than ever before.

The most important teaching of the Buddha, I believe, is the doctrine of *anattā*, usually known as the doctrine of 'non-soul'. This doctrine sometimes frightened the ancients, and, if I am not wrong, it seldom figures in our discourses nowadays, as if it were outdated, irrelevant to our world. However, it is in this that lies the solution to all our conflicts. So far as I am aware, no religious leader so much emphasized the eradication of the ego as the Buddha did in this doctrine.

What is, then, this terrible doctrine of *anattā*? Here I will have to repeat, to some extent, what I stated on previous occasions. The identification of the individual's essence with the empirical psycho-physical elements of individuality is ingrained in humanity. It was known to the

J. Samten, ' Buddhist Analysis of the Cause of Social Disharmony and its Solutions' , *Buddhism and Social Ideals*, ed. H. S. Shukla and B. Kumar (Varanasi: Centre for Buddhist Studies, Banaras Hindu University, 2009), p. 157.

See K. Bhattacharya, *Some Thoughts on Early Buddhism with Special Reference to its Relation to the Upaniṣ ads* (Acharya Dharmananda Kosambi Memorial Lectures, Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1998), p. 7.

earlier literature of India, the Upaniṣads, which sometimes mention it under mythological garbs. The Buddha clearly says: The ascetics and brahmins who envisage the essence of the individual – the self (*ātman/attan*) – in diverse ways envisage either all the five aggregates (*khandha*) which constitute our empirical individuality or one or other of them.⁶

It was against this background that the Upaniṣads proclaimed the *ātman*, which is not an individual substance, a 'soul', but, identical with the *brahman*, the Being itself, the universal, absolute Consciousness beyond the subject-object split – the transcendent Impersonality which man realizes through the negation of his individuality.

The Buddha, more preoccupied with liberation and the 'good of the greatest number' (*bahujanahita*), taught *anattā*. The elements of individuality are all impermanent (*anicca*) and hence painful (*dukkha*). But, when one is attached to what is painful, saying: 'this is mine, this am I, this is my *ātman*', can one understand one's own misery and liberate oneself from it?⁷

The Buddha, therefore, analyzing the aggregates, says: What is impermanent is painful (*yad aniccaṃ taṃ dukkhaṃ*), what is painful is *anattā* (*yaṃ dukkhaṃ tad anattā*), and of what is *anattā*, one should understand through right knowledge: 'this is not mine, this am I not, this is not my *ātman*' (*yad anattā taṃ n' etaṃ mama n' eso 'ham asmi na m' eso attā ti evam etaṃ yathābhūtaṃ sammappaññāya daṭṭhabbaṃ*).⁸

Now, if there is egoism, it is because of the false identification of ourselves with our psycho-physical individuality, which engenders the notions of 'I' and 'mine' (*ahaṃkāra*, *mamaṃkāra*).⁹ With the cessation of this identification, therefore, ceases egoism.

And the Buddha has left an incomparable message to the modern world,¹⁰ showing the way to realize this goal. It is the most venerated *Sutta* of 'mindfulness' (*satipaṭṭhāna*),¹¹ on which is based the Vipassanā method of meditation.

There are four kinds of *satipaṭṭhāna*, consisting in the observation of the body (*kāyānupassanā*), the observation of the feelings (*vedanānupassanā*), the observation of the mind

ye hi keci, bhikkhave, samaṇ ā vā brāhmaṇ ā vā anekavihiṭaṃ attānaṃ samanupassamānā samanupassanti sabbe te pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti etesaṃ vā aññataraṃ. Saṃyutta-Nikāya III, p. 46.

yo nu kho dukkhaṃ allīno dukkhaṃ upagato dukkhaṃ ajjhosito dukkhaṃ etaṃ mama eso 'ham asmi eso me attā ti samanupassati api nu kho so sāmaṇ vā dukkhaṃ pari jāneyya dukkhaṃ vā parikkhepetvā viharayya. Majjhima-Nikāya I, p. 233.

See K. Bhattacharya, *L' Ātman-Brahman dans le Bouddhisme ancien* (Paris 1973), p. 12, n. 3.

Ibid., p. 74.

'Eine Buddha-Botschaft für unsere Zeit', (Bhikkhu) Nyanaponika, *Satipaṭṭhāna*, Konstanz 1950.

Majjhima-Nikāya, Sutta 10; Dīgha-Nikāya, Sutta 22.

(*cittānupassanā*), and the observation of the mind-objects (*dhammānupassanā*).

Strictly speaking, the first two belong to the *samatha* (concentration) type of meditation, and the second two alone constitute the *vipassanā* (insight) type; and there is a hierarchy of levels among those who are apt to practice them – as the great commentator, Buddhaghosa, pointed out.¹² But, nowadays, all of them are included in Vipassanā, excepting, perhaps, the *ānāpānasati*, the mindfulness concerning the breathing in and out, which Tradition includes in the observation of the body.

However, all these ‘observations’ lead to the same result. We observe our body, our bodily activities in our everyday life, we observe our feelings, we observe our mind in its different states, and so on. We realize that everything comes and goes, that nothing is permanent, and thus we realize the three basic characteristics of all phenomenal things, according to Buddhism, namely that everything is impermanent (*anicca*), hence painful (*dukkha*), and hence non-self (*anattā*).

The false notion of self which each of us has is thus eliminated. With this elimination comes the elimination of the false distinction between ‘others’ and ‘self’, and this elimination means total integration, on which are based the cardinal virtues of *mettā* and *karuṇā*, ‘friendship’ and ‘compassion’, from which flow all the other virtues. Herein lies the source of true reconciliation.

Papañcasūdanī I, p. 239; *Sumaṅ galavilāsini* III, p. 754.