

Buddhist Contribution for a Healthy Society towards the Millennium Development Goals

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It may be well expressed that the Buddhist aspiration which extends to the effect that “may all living beings be happy and well beings¹” necessarily encompasses the entire eightfold goal counted as Millennium Development goals². The whole Buddhist training process expounded by the Buddha is aimed at happiness and well being of all mankind. It is of course praiseworthy that the United Nations put forward an eightfold goal endeavouring its achievement over a period which ends in 2015; this is going quite parallel with the Buddhist aim of bringing happiness and well being to whole mankind. It appears that most of the millennium development goals set are directly concerned with the health factor of mankind, however

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1. “*Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitatattā*” – Sn 142-52

2. See. <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/mdgoverview.html>

there are others too which relates to health as the condition to bring forth a healthy society.

The term “healthy society” does not merely mean a society where people live without any disease and physical illness. According to the definition given by World Health Organization, “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity³.” In Buddhism, we also talk about health in this all encompassing broad sense. It is quite evident from the following statement of those who reached the culmination of Buddhist training process, aiming at happiness and well being: “Indeed we live very happily, in good health among the ailing; among men who are ailing we live in good health⁴ Here it should be mentioned that good health in the above statement does not mean plain absence of disease or physical illness. This present article tries to explore Buddhist elements as such which will contribute to good health in any given society; thus aiding fulfillment of the millennium development goals laid out and outlining Buddhist service to mankind.

A Primary concern of Buddhism for man is to bring out a happier life for him, devoid of miseries and sufferings in this very life. In other words, Buddhism proposes to have a healthy society for man to lead a happier life by pointing out what are detrimental. The Buddha in his discourses has disclosed all the destructive forces which are going against the happiness of man; and he also prescribed remedial methods to overcome them successfully. But, it should be noted here that the responsibility of achieving the aim overcoming all the hindrances solely depends on man’s individual and collective perseverance and pursuit. It is really interesting that most of the destructive elements which can be recognized through Buddhist discourses are already acknowledged by United Nations when they targeted to eradicate these undesirable elements as their millennium

3. See. Preamble to the Constitution of World Health Organization

4. Dhammapada verse 198,

goals listed in the 55/2, United Nations Millennium Declaration.⁵

In the effort of developing a healthy society it is most crucial first of all, to recognize the main problem which is immensely detrimental to physical, mental and social well being rather than that of all other arising problems thereof. It is none other than the problem of poverty and hunger to which both Buddhism and United Nations' Millennium goals give the equal weight in order to solve it. Buddhism recognizes poverty as a root cause to all sort of social miseries which are mainly responsible for social ills. Cakkavattisihanāda sutta eloquently expresses the adverse repercussions entailing from prevailing poverty due to unequal distribution of wealth⁶ Hunger is considered to be an immediately solvable problem, according to Buddhism. For food is taken for granted as first thing in the world by Buddhism emphasizing that all living being sustain on food.⁷

Viewed in terms of Buddhist thinking, poverty is the worst and most horrible thing in human life⁸ to which immediate solution should be found because of the fact that it makes life miserable. Buddhism recognizes that the people who are destitute because of poverty obtain their food and clothing with utmost difficulty⁹ A person afflicted by poverty is explained in Ina Sutta of Anguttaranikāya as one possesses only a little or nothing at all called one's own (*assako*), one who is not affluent and in plenty (*anālhiko*); one has to be constantly in debt to others, borrowing money (*inam ādiyati*) on the promise of repayment, with or without interest (*vaḍḍim paṭisunāti*)¹⁰. There is no doubt that the Buddhist assessment of poverty is in line with that of United Nations when they resolve "to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one

5. See. <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

6. "Adhanānam dhane ananuppadiyamāne dāliddiyam vepullam gacchati..."D. Cakkavatti-sihanāda sutta

7. Eka nāma kim? Sabbe sattā āhāratthitikā

8. Dāliddiyam bhikkhave dukkham lokasmim: A. III. 351

9. "Dalidde appannapānabhojane kasiravuttike yattha kasirena ghāsacchādo labbhati"- A. III. 385.

10. A. III. 351. F.

dollar a day¹¹”. The danger of poverty lies not only in the fact that it opens access to hunger which is in Buddhist terminology greatest sickness¹² but also in the fact that it prevents man from success of life both physically as well as spiritually. The Buddha himself precisely pointed out that “Afflicted with pangs of hunger, one comprehends not the dhamma, even while it is being preached”¹³. It is obvious that hunger cannot be treated in whatsoever manner except for providing food. Scarcity of food prevails when there is poverty.

Poverty results in being deprived of even the most basic requirements. What “sin” had the abject poor incurred but to bear such a fate of deficiency? Buddhism does not come forward to claim that it is due to kamma. Kamma in Buddhism is not a kind of determinism which cannot be changed by personal will and effort. Nor does it explain the absence of wealth or poverty in society as an outcome of any divine misanthropy. We know at the same time that there are people, nations and countries that possess properties, wealth and luxuries in grand scale. This is also not the result of the kamma or the sympathy of a divine being. It is really the result of economic mismanagement by responsible parties. According to Buddhism, each individual has a duty and obligation to work for the progress of the society in which he lives, and for the benefit of his own and his fellow beings. If each individual is not facilitated with opportunities and infrastructures for the economic enterprises, its result may be poverty. This is the message given in the Kuṭadanta-sutta in Dighanikāya.

Economic prosperity in a society which, should be achieved through righteous means is resultant from joint-efforts and synergy of individual citizens and the state via proper management. In this respect, both parties have their own roles to play for the achievement of a desired end. Buddhism encourages concerted efforts with commitment and dedication in poverty elimination through the

11. <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.htm>

12. “Jigacchā paramā rogā” – Dhammapada verse 203

13. “Jigacchādukkhena dhamma desiyamānēpi paṭivijjhitum na sakkhissati”
- DhA. III.363

culmination of economic progress. When we take each individual commitment in the economic enterprises, role of the individual is delineated in the following way in Buddhism:

Paatirūpakārī dhuravā – uṭṭhātā vindate dhamam (Sn. I. 187)

(He, riches find whose life is in the right, who bears his yoke with strenuous resolve)

Wealth does not come from nothing. It has to be amassed through earning. According to the above statement, there are three characteristics which man should be endowed with in order to achieve wealth. They are namely - doing what is proper (*patirūpakārī*), personal responsibility (*dhuravā*) and striving with firm resolve (*uṭṭhātā*). The first characteristic seems to imply two aspects of what is proper as the means to achieve wealth i.e. both ethical and psychological aspects. Buddhism does not encourage man to earn wealth or property simply by any means, by hook or by crook, being unrighteous and illegal. On the contrary, it is the constant advice of Buddhism that man should earn wealth by righteous and legal means (*dhammikenā, dhamma-laddhena*). That means Buddhism does not allow a man to be harmful to others in whatsoever manner. In addition, his action cannot be harmful to his spiritual progress too. Accumulation of wealth comes under the right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) where there is a clear-cut no provision for a man to choose unethical or immoral means for his living.

More than ever before, it is clear that some individuals, groups or companies do engage in unrighteous living means and amassing illegal wealth while causing irreparable harm to the well being of others in the society. Examples of such undesirable income generating as found in arm-dealing and drug trafficking for instance inevitably result in increasing poverty, crimes, physical and mental deceases and even lost of precious lives. This is the reason why Buddhism advises people not to engage in a living means which is harmful to social well being.

Psychological aspect here would involve in making a choices

of what is to be done in accord with man's own psychological and physical capacities. Each individual is to be well aware of his own psychological as well as physical potentialities and abilities, otherwise he would not be successful in his endeavour.

The second characteristic of a man who engages in earning wealth is personal responsibility (*dhuravā*) on his effort in order to progress and succeed. If he shuns his responsibility he would not be reaping the desired result. The third characteristic is really going in line with the second; in other words it is an extension of the second. The main secret lying behind any achievement whether it is material or spiritual is personal effort and dedication (*uṭṭātā*). In poverty eliminating programs, it is interesting to note that Buddhism encourages man by using almost heart leaden terms with regard to our personal efforts. The way how a man should exercise his effort in accumulating wealth is shown so strikingly in Buddhist discourses as follows:

*Uṭṭhānaviriyādhigatehi bāhābalaparicitehi sedāvakkhittehi dhammikehi dhammaladdhehi bhogehi*¹⁴

(Wealth being acquired with effort and striving, with the sweat of one's brow, with the strength of one's arms and righteously)

Not only in acquiring wealth but also in all other endeavours one has mainly to rely on one's own efforts. According to Buddhism, nothing can be achieved by any other means except one's own effort¹⁵. But at the same time Buddhism emphasizes that man must work hard - intelligently to acquire satisfactory results. A Person's effort can be effective only when it is endowed with cleverness, skillfulness (*dakkho hoti*), untiring (*analaso*) discrimination or determination in its techniques (*tatrūpāya vīmansāya samannāgato hoti*), ability to carry out (*alam kātum*) and ability to organize it (*alam samvidhātum*).¹⁶

14. A. III. 45 & 76

15. "tumhe hi kiccam ātappam" -

16. "tatha dakkho hoti analaso tatrūpāya vīmansāya samannāgato hoti alam kātum alam samvidhātum" - Vyagghapajja-sutta, A. VIII. 54

Only possible answer to the problem of poverty and hunger is to have a sound economic condition in any given society. Buddhism acknowledges and recognizes that it is the state or government's duty to facilitate each group or each individual's engagement in contributing activities for the nation's economic development. Personal endeavors in private sectors would not be sufficient for a whole nation's economic development without state or governmental support and intervention. Therefore, Buddhist texts explicitly suggest through myths and legends, to the state the way how the state should facilitate a diversity of economic endeavours for its people. Examining Buddhist texts on government participation in human resource management for a sound economic condition of a country, Prof. Dhammavihari Thero observes:

"It shows how the rulers handle the manpower resources of the land with great wisdom, without putting square pegs in round holes. Paying due heed to personal skills and aptitude, people are selected for agricultural and pastoral pursuits [*kasi-gorakkhe*], for trade and commercial ventures [*vānijjāya*], as well as for civil and administrative purposes [*rājaporise*]. An amazingly impregnated Pali word *ussahati* denoting a meaning of "ability and willingness to cope with a situation" is used every time when "competence, aptitude and temperament" is thought of in terms of successful employment¹⁷"

It is obvious from the foregoing explanation that the Buddhist principle of production has great concern over economic prosperity obtainable without harming environmental synergy - the calmness, peace and mutual cordial relation between man and nature, an important factor for a healthy society. When we take Buddhist principle of consumption which is also one of the important factors in economy, it is further confirmed that Buddhism has paid thorough attention on one's contribution to others' well being. Buddhist principle of consumption is formulated in the

17. Prof. Dhammavihari Thero, *Dhamma- Man Religion, Society Governance in Buddhism*, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka, 2006, P. 118.

Rāsiya-sutta of Anguttara-nikāya in the following way:

“Dhammena bhoge pariyesitvā attānam sukheti pīneti samvibhajati puññāni karoti¹⁸”

(Having acquired wealth righteously; one makes oneself happy and comfortable with the wealth thus earned; and one shares one’s wealth and does meritorious deeds).

This recommends as Bhikkhu Bodhi says, that wealth be acquired by right livelihood and be utilized in meaningful ways to promote the happiness of oneself and others¹⁹. In the principle referred to above, most relevant part to our theme is represented by the term *samvibhajati* which means “shares”. This character of sharing one’s own wealth with others is really a relief method to ease the lamentable situation of poverty. This is recommended by the Buddha not only to the private individuals but also to the state or the public sectors. Among the principles of rulers (*rāja-dhamma*) one of the principles is known as *pariccāga* which means “giving out” or “sharing”²⁰. In the present global society it can easily be seen that there is a vast gap between the *haves* and *have-nots*. If Buddhist economic principles which are relevant to both private and public sectors are duly adopted and perpetuated in practice, elimination of a global slogan for eradication of poverty, all in harmony would not be that much of an uphill battle.

A closely related offshoot of poverty, social ills, goes hand in hand with it and is most destructive to individuals” and a whole societal well-being. When we look carefully at Buddhist economic principles formulated by the Buddha (both production and consumption aspects), it is not difficult for us to find some remedial methods even to the problem of ill-health. We have already come across the fact that Buddhism decries accumulation of wealth by force (*sāhasena*) or by unrighteous manner (*adhammena*) which

18. SN. 42:12

19. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Walking Even Amidst the Uneven: http://www.accesstoinight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_33.html

20. See. *Dasarāja-dhamma*

includes the forbidden trades such as poison, drugs, and alcohol, human and so on which inevitably give rise to different types of physical and mental diseases or illnesses. If those who engage in such detrimental activities do not stop by their own accord, it is the duty of the state to deter and eradicate such destructive ventures. Buddhism acknowledges and endorses the instruction given by the Wheel Turning Monarch to his son about the way how a country should exist under the control of the king. The way is illustrated in saying that “dear son, make sure that there would not be any injustice in your kingdom²¹”. This precisely implies that under the injunction endorsed by Buddhism, there is no provision for a government to permit the sanction to any such business within the territory of its state.

In the Buddhist principles of consumption health factor is the highlight, specifically in the way of meal enjoyment. We know that the Buddha at the very outset of his teaching, advised his disciples to give up two extreme living ways namely self indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) and self mortification (*attakilamathānuyoga*) for the reason that they are not beneficial to well being (*anatta-samhito*). Though this instruction is aimed at his monastic disciple, when the two extremes are taken as living ways, there is no doubt that they are quite relevant to every human being. Self indulgence refers to the extravagant luxurious life style while self mortification refers to a miserable life style. In the present global society we experience some dangerous results specifically in relation to our health factor from both these aspects which are in practice in the lifestyles of the *haves* and *have-nots*. It is obvious that a miserable life due to malnutrition is proven susceptible to various types of diseases, including epidemics which cause immense suffering and high mortality rates. Such occurrences have escalated to the extent that render these as a world problem to which the United Nations is trying to rectify. Luxurious lifestyles of the *haves*

21. “Mā ca te tāta vijite adhammakaro pavattittha”-D. 26: Cakkavatti-sīhanāda-sutta

too seem not to be so much different from the former. Their problem is over consumption which again causes the miseries in their life due to many related illnesses, sicknesses and diseases eventually.

One of the Buddhist principles relating to consumption is that one should know the right amount in food (*bhojane mattaññutā*). Taking too much food or overeating is recognized as a factor not only for uneasiness but also for various illnesses. It is reported that the Buddha proposed one meal for a day to his monastic members knowing that taking less food is contributory to less illness (*appātankatā*) and physical comfort (*appābādhata*).²²

Another important economic principle that Buddhism contributes to the world in relation to consumption, which positively minimizes the problem of poverty is a balanced livelihood (*samajīvikatā*). In the *Vuagghapajja-sutta*, the Buddha explains principle of *samajīvikatā* in the following way:

“Knowing his income and expenditure one leads a balanced life without being either too extravagant or too niggardly, thinking “my income can be in excess in my expenditure but not in excess of income”, just as a goldsmith or his apprentice knows by holding up a scale that indicates by so much it has dipped down and by so much it has tilted up, one knows his income and expenditure and leads a balanced livelihood²³”

Here an extravagant life style rejected by the Buddha needs our special attention. Both the life styles refused by the Buddha seem to be in practice globally at present. If a person practices a livelihood exceeding his income, it is no need to say that he would be unable to continue so for a long time. He would necessarily fall into poverty. If our people come forward to follow the balance livelihood irrespective of their differences in religion, ethnicity, race and so on, it is certain that before long global poverty rate can be considerably reduced to a desirable level.

22. M. I. 37.

23. *Vuagghapajja-sutta*, A. VIII. 54

In order to bring forth a healthy global society, another important health factor issue has been raised by UN millennium development goals. This has come to be considered in three associated directions namely, (i) child mortality, (ii) maternal health and (iii) HIV, malaria and other diseases. These factors cannot be simply ascribed only to the prevailing problem of poverty and hunger for they can be seen even in the developed countries where poverty and hunger is a rarity.

According to a new report, an estimated 2 million babies die within first 24 hours of their birth each year worldwide²⁴. This is not only due to parental malnutrition in underdeveloped countries. This situation is not different in developed countries too. The same report informs us that the United States has the second worst newborn mortality rate in the developed world²⁵. We not only see the alarming increase in physical diseases but also psychological illnesses in our present world. The most notable thing is that even children are subject to the affliction of mental disorders. A report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) records that nearly 20 percent of American children (aged 3 to 17) suffer some form of mental disorder²⁶.

This shows us that we have to explore another source other than economic from which such health problems come into existence. By saying this, we are not proposing to rule out completely the possibility of arising health problems from the lack of requisites for living due to financial difficulties. In this regard, we have to raise the question as to why such types of health problems occur in the affluent societies of developed countries. When we turn to Buddhist teachings, it would not be difficult to find the answer. Modern development of science and technology and also the modern globalization movement have made an unprecedented difference in the life of the people. What we find more prominently in the life of people in the

24. <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/HEALTH/parenting/05/08/mothers.index/in>

25. Ibid.

26. <http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2013/06/20/children-mental-disorder.aspx>

modern society is the inclination towards sensory gratification. When people crave for sensory pleasures, it is inevitable that they naturally depart from the aspect of spirituality. Though Buddhism accepts that the inclination for sensory pleasures is a natural instinctive phenomenon in the minds of the people²⁷, it does not encourage people to actualize this instinct to the extent that it becomes detrimental sensory gratification. Buddhism advocates that sensual gratification is one of the extremist life styles which should be avoided by those who seek for the ultimate happiness²⁸. When people are not aware with self scrutiny with spiritual discipline, they are unable to limit their unruly running after of sensory pleasures. This is the reason why the Buddha pointed out that “not by a shower of gold coins does contentment arise in sensual pleasures”²⁹.

The danger involved in the craving for pleasures is that we will never get sufficient resources to satisfy them. Therefore, those who are bound have to keep on a constant struggle for resources. In this struggle for finding sufficient resources, man becomes something like a galloping horse running after a carrot. Two characteristics namely, running after pleasures and struggling for sufficient resources generate the conflicts in mind, and as a result there arises different kinds of physical as well as psychological sufferings.

It is the Buddhist view that physical and psychological aspects of man have mutual dependence. They act together.³⁰ According to Buddhism man needs a well balanced mental condition for the maintenance of a healthy life. Stress and depression which are the outcomes of present consumerism and its competitive lifestyles of man constantly bring sickness to the mind which in turn badly affects the physical aspect of our psycho-physical corporeality. Searching for “requirements” introduced by science and technology for an extravagant lifestyle is always accompanied with craving, aversion

27. “sukhakāmā hi manussā dukkhatikkulā M. I. P. 341

28. S.56. 11. Dhamma-cakkappavattana-sutta

29. “Na kahāpana-vassena titti kāmesu vijjati” Dhammapada verse 186

30. SN. Nalakaḷāpiya-sutta

and delusion which are the root causes of any mental illness. On the other hand, this search for “requirements” which exceed the needs for the maintenance of a life destroys the mental equilibrium and peace of man. This renders a person unable to live within his normalcy. This stressful mentality of the parents badly affects their children. There is no doubt that the way of life introduced by Buddhism may certainly be the antidote for most of our present social problems which are detrimental to a healthy global society.