

Prosperity and Happiness The Buddhist View

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The Buddha's prescriptions for prosperity and happiness have been always laced with liberal doses of ethics. But sometimes the correlation between ethics and happiness is not very clear. The following pages try to make this connection.

The Buddha's attitude towards material wealth

Many people, including Buddhists, believe that Buddhism spurns the acquisition of material comforts and pleasure and is concerned only with spiritual development. The attainment of Nibbana is, indeed, the goal. However, the Buddha was very much alive to the fact that economic stability is essential for man's welfare and happiness.

In the Anguttaranikaya (A.II. (69-70) the Buddha mentions that there are four kinds of happiness derived from wealth. They are:

Atthisukha - The happiness of ownership.

Anavajjasukha - The happiness derived from wealth which is earned by means of right livelihood, i.e. not dealing in the sale of harmful weapons, not dealing in the slaughter of animals and sale of flesh, not dealing in the sale of liquor, not dealing in the sale of human beings (e.g. slavery and prostitution) and not dealing in the sale of poisons.

Ananasukha - the happiness derived from not being in debt. Bhogasukha - the happiness of sharing one's wealth. This kind of happiness is an extremely important concept in Buddhism.

Although the Buddha saw that economic stability was important for man's happiness, he also saw the harmful side of wealth. Rather, he saw that man's natural desires and propensities are such that wealth provides ample scope for these propensities to surface and indulge themselves. Yet, it appears, desires can never be fully satisfied for it is stated in the Ratthapalasutta (M.II.68) "Uno loko atitto tanhadaso." The world is never satisfied and is ever a slave to craving. The Dhammapada (vs. 186-187) also points out this insatiability in man. "Na kahapana vassena titthi kamesu vijjati..." Not by a shower of gold coins does contentment arise in sensual pleasures.

On another occasion the Buddha said, " Grass is to be sought for by those in need of grass. Firewood is to be sought for by those in need of firewood. A cart to be sought for by those in need of a cart. A servant by him who is in need of a servant. But, Headman, in no manner whatsoever do I declare that gold and silver be accepted or sought for. "(S.IV 326) The meaning is very clear from these statements. Wealth is to be sought not as an end in itself but as a means to an end, for attaining various objectives and fulfilling duties.

The Andhasutta (A.I. 128-129) presents an apt analogy where we can locate the ethically ideal position. The Buddha says there are three types of persons to be found in the world: The totally blind, the one who can see with one eye, and, the one who can see with both eyes. The man who is totally blind is the one who can neither acquire wealth nor discern right from wrong. The one who can see with one eye is the man who can acquire wealth but cannot discern right from wrong. The one who has perfect sight in both eyes is the ideal individual. He can acquire wealth and also discern what is right from wrong. The Buddhist view is that the ideal man is the man who is wealthy and virtuous.

In another analogy (S.I.. 93ff) the Buddha classified people into the following categories:

Tama (dark) to Tama (dark)

Tama (dark) to Joti (light)

Joti (light) to tama (dark)

Joti (light) to Joti (light)

The tama person is poor and may or may not possess good qualities such as faith and generosity. The Joti person is rich and may or may not possess good qualities such as faith and generosity. The Tama person who does not possess good qualities who is mean and devoid of faith will go from darkness to darkness. The Tama person who has faith and is of a generous disposition will go from darkness to light. The Joti person who is devoid of faith and generosity will go from light to darkness. The Joti person who has good qualities will go from light to light.

Sometimes wealth causes certain people to be miserly. The Buddha has remarked that riches "that are not rightly utilized run to waste, not to enjoyment" and compares such a person to a lake of pure water lying in an inaccessible savage region. (S.I. 89-90).

How should one acquire wealth in a way that will conduce to prosperity and happiness?

People from various walks of life and of varying temperaments came to the Buddha to ask him all kinds of advice. The people of Veludvara and Dhigajanu Vyaggapajja of Kakkarapatta, for instance (on separate occasions) visited the Buddha and requested him to teach them those things which would conduce to their happiness in this life as well as the next.

Dhigajanu Vyaggapajja (like the people of veludvara) confessed to enjoying life thoroughly. "Lord" he said "we householders like supporting wives and children. We love to use the finest muslins from Benares and the best sandalwood, deck ourselves with flowers, garlands and cosmetics. We also like to use both silver and gold." (A.IV 280)

With great compassion did the Buddha give Vyaggapajja (as he did the people of veludvara on another occasion) a comprehensive prescription for the attainment of prosperity and happiness without ever deprecating the life of sensuous enjoyment Laymen like to lead. It is in this sutta that the Buddha advocated four conditions which if fulfilled would give one prosperity and happiness. They are:

1. Utthanasampada - achievement in alertness. The Buddha has described this quality as skill and perseverance and applying an inquiring mind into ways and means whereby one is able to arrange and carry out one's work successfully.
2. Arakkhasampada - achievement in carefulness,
3. Kalyanamittata - having the companionship of good friends who have the qualities of faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom.
4. Samajivikata - maintaining a balanced livelihood. This last condition requires one not to be unduly elated or dejected in the face of gain or loss but to have a good idea of one's income and expenditure and live within one's means. A man is advised not to waste his wealth like shaking a fig tree to get one fruit, thereby causing all the fruits on the tree, ripe and unripe, to fall on the ground and go waste. Nor is one advised to hoard wealth without enjoying it and die of starvation.

This advice with regard to acquiring material wealth is followed up with four conditions for one's spiritual welfare which would ensure one a happy birth in the next life also. They are: Having the qualities of faith, (saddha) virtue, (sila) charity (dana) and wisdom (panna)

A careful look at the two sets of four conditions clearly show that the principle underlying them is that one should maintain a balance between material and spiritual progress. Directing one's attention to one's spiritual welfare along with one's daily activities having to do with acquiring wealth acts as a break to ever-increasing greed. The purpose of restraining greed or sense desires is to develop contentment with less wants. Amassing wealth for its own sake is condemned by the Buddha. When wealth is not shared and is used only to satisfy one's own selfish aims, it leads to resentment in society. When this sutta is carefully considered the connection between ethics and happiness becomes apparent.

Further in the sutta, wealth is likened to a tank of water with four outlets through which the water is liable to flow out and go waste. These outlets are what dissipates wealth, viz., debauchery, addiction to liquor, gambling and keeping company with evil doers. The four inlets which keep replenishing the supply of water in the tank are the practising of the opposites of what has

been mentioned above such as abstaining from debauchery, etc.

According to the Alavakasutta (Sn. p.33) wealth is acquired by energetic striving, amassed by strength of arm and sweat of brow.

The Buddha has also observed that in acquiring wealth one should not be deterred by cold, heat, flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, creeping things, dying of hunger and thirst but that one should be prepared to endure all these difficulties. (M.I. 85) In short, being idle and shirking hardships is not the best way to succeed in gaining prosperity.

Earning wealth through selling intoxicating liquor, harmful weapons, drugs and poisons or animals to be killed are all condemned. They fall into the category of wrong livelihood (A.III 206.) One's livelihood must be earned through lawful means, non - violently (S.IV 336). In fact, the Buddha has stated that the wealth of those who amass it without intimidating others, like a roving bee who gathers honey without damaging flowers, well increase in the same way as does an anthill. (D.III 188)

In the Dhananjanisutta (M.II. 188) ven'ble Sariputta states that no one can escape the dreadful results of unlawful and non - righteous methods of livelihood by giving the reason that one is engaged in them to perform his duties and fulfill obligations. The Dhammikassutta of the Sutta nipata states "Let him dutifully maintain his parents and practise an honourable trade. The householder who observes this strenuously goes to the gods by name Sayampabbhas."

In the Parabhavasutta of the Sutta nipata, the Buddha stressed ethical conduct if a man is to avoid loss of wealth. In fact, innumerable are the discourses which advise one to observe the pancasila - the five precepts, which are based on the principle of respect and concern for others. They imply that one should not jeopardize the interests of others (M.I. 416), that one must not deprive another of what legitimately belongs to him (M.I. 157) for it is indicated that a man's possessions form the basis of his happiness (M.A.II 329, Commentary to the Saleyyaka sutta, M.I. p.285) Far less should any one deprive another of his life or cause pain or harm to any living being. The Dhammapada (v 129) states:

"Sabbe tasanti dandassa

Sabbe bhayanti macuno

Attanam upamam katva

Na haneyya, na ghataya."

"All tremble at the rod. All fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither strike nor cause to strike."

How should one spend wealth so that one may obtain optimum happiness?

In the Anguttaranikaya (A III 279) the Buddha says that there are five advantages to be gained in having wealth. With one's wealth one can make oneself, parents, wife, children, workers, friends and colleagues happy and also make offerings to recluses and Brahmins. The Buddha says that a person who spends his money in this way can be compared to a lovely lake with clear, blue, cold, delicious, crystalline water which lies near a village or township from which people can draw water, drink from it, bathe in it and use it for any other purpose. (S. I.90) The Pattakammasutta (A II 67) extends this list besides the above ways of spending money to include securing wealth against misfortunes by way of fire, water, king, robbers, enemies or ill disposed heirs, spending wealth for the fivefold offerings such as natibali (relatives), atithibali (guests), petabali (departed ancestors) rajabali (king's tax) devabali (gods), and offering gifts to recluses and Brahmins who abstain from sloth and negligence who are genuinely disciplined, kind and forbearing.

The Pattakammasutta goes on to say that if a person disregarding these fourfold purposes spends his money it is called "wealth that has failed to seize its opportunity, failed to win merit, unfittingly made use of."

How should one protect the wealth one has earned?

The Buddha has pointed out that wealth must be protected from fire, floods, the king, robbers, enemies and unbeloved heirs (A.III 259). Two out of these five dangers are natural calamities. The other three arise through human agency. This is where the importance of the second precept is seen. If each individual observes the five precepts, society is to a great deal made secure

against infringement of individual rights and a peaceful, harmonious existence is ensured. What the Buddha points out is that ethics have a direct bearing on one's security and happiness.

The correlation between ethics and happiness

Buddhist ethics are based on the principle that certain actions (kamma) result in certain effects; in short, they are based on the Law of Causality - Paticcasamupada. But, we may ask, why do immoral acts result in suffering and unhappiness? What is the correlation between moral acts and beneficial results?

The Culakammavibhangasutta of the Majjhimanikaya mentions that a person who kills a living creature will be born in an evil state. This remark is not based on mere speculation. Such states are observable through higher knowledge - abhinna - attained through meditation. It is through this higher knowledge obtained at Enlightenment, by assiduous mind training and purification, that the Buddha was able to see by means of a thoroughly clarified mind, free from all defilements, the data on which he based his theory of Causality. This doctrine of Paticcasamupada or conditionedness explains the relational dynamics of phenomena, both physical and psychological. Paticcasamupada is the process through which the law of kamma also operates. Kamma, as every Buddhist knows, originates in volition. The oft quoted words of the Buddha regarding kamma are, "Cetena, bhikkhave, kammam vadami....." (A. III 415) At the same time, Buddhism acknowledged the fact that there were laws, other than kammaniyama, that operated in the world such as uttuniyama, bijaniyama, cittaniyama and dhammaniyama.

As has been seen the pancasila ensures our security in society. Also, to a great extent, the fact that good actions lead to beneficial results and that bad actions lead to suffering is observable in daily life and we are able to know this experientially.

The Buddha's prescription for prosperity and happiness in this and in the next life is based on very practical advice of a worldly nature, inextricably linked with ethics. The layman's code of ethics - which includes the observance of the pancasila - the five precepts - is a sine qua non for all Buddhists. The social consequences of observing the basic ethics enunciated in the layman's code of ethics are very extensive. They contribute to producing a protective atmosphere of security and goodwill around one which is conducive to both material and spiritual progress.

The most important suttas included in the layman's code of ethics are the Mahamangalasutta, Dhammikasutta, Parabhavasutta and Vasala sutta of the Sutta nipata, the Sigalovadasutta of the Digha nikaya and Vyaggapajjasutta and the Gihisukhasutta of the Anguttaranikaya.

There is no space here to go into the reciprocal duties listed in the Sigalovadasutta between a householder and members of his family and the reciprocal duties of a householder vis - a - vis the members of society on the periphery of his family. Briefly, there are duties and obligations which a layman should perform for each of the individuals represented by the six directions, viz., the East (parents - children), the South (Teachers - pupils), the West, (husband - wife), North (friends and associates), Zenith (religieux - laymen), Nadir (employer - employee). If these duties and obligations are fulfilled they would contribute considerably to establishing harmonious relationships within the family and without. Among the duties and obligations of an employer towards and employee are assigning work according to ability, supplying food and wages, tending them in sickness, sharing delicacies, and giving them leave. Employees should perform duties well, uphold the employer's good name, take only what is given, rise before him and sleep after him.

Among the duties of children towards parents are supporting them (in their old age) and performing other duties for them. The duties of parents towards children include restraining them from evil, encouraging them to do good, training them for a profession, arranging a suitable marriage and handing over their inheritance at the proper time.

A husband should be courteous to the wife, not despise her, faithful to her, give her, authority over household matters, provide her with adornments. A wife should perform her duties well, be hospitable to relatives on both sides and attendants, faithful, protect the husband's wealth, and be skillfull and industrious in discharging her duties. This advice shows that good relations between a husband and wife and the good relation they maintain with others and their own industry conduce to their prosperity and happiness. Co - operation, interaction and good will are stressed.

A classic definition of good actions and bad actions is given in the Ambalatthika Rahulovadasutta of the Majjhimanikaya:

"Whatever action, bodily, verbal or mental, leads to suffering for oneself, for others or for both, that action is bad (akusala). Whatever action, bodily, verbal or mental, does not lead to suffering for oneself, for others or for both, that action is good

(kusala)"

A guiding principle concerning Buddhist ethics is the axiom, "Yo attanam rakkhati, so param rakkhati". He who protect himself protects others or "Param rakkhanto attanam rakkhati." When you protect others, you protect yourself.

It is said that one protects others by tolerance (khantiya), non - injury (avahimsa) compassionate love (mettata) and kindness (anudayata). It can be seen that pancasila is implicit in these. When the pancasila is observed scrupulously it protects one and others very adequately.

Buddhist ethics urge that one's actions should flow from a view that is not egocentric but which regards oneself and others as one. What is stressed is not a monism but the principle of anatta in the psycho - physical process which goes to make up the human being. Consider stanza 7 of the Karaniyamettasutta of the sutta nipata:

"Mata yatha niyamputtam

ayusa ekaputtam anurakkhe

evampi sabba bhutesu

manasam bhavaye aparimanam."

"Just as a mother would protect

her only child with her life,

even so let one cultivate

a boundless love towards all beings."

The view of anatta in the philosophy shows that the division between the mentally constructed notion of "I" and the rest of the world as the "other" is artificial. When actions flow from this stand point, then such actions are bound to be ethical (kusala); that is to say, they do not lead to raga (attachment) but viraga (detachment). This, of course, is the ideal - the goal,

This view of detachment recommended, based on the belief that all phenomena are devoid of a permanent essence, demonstrates the fact that there is no radical difference between the outlook of one who is bent on attaining nibbana and the one who is practising the path in lay life.

The Buddha's prescriptions for the attainment of prosperity and happiness through material wealth in an ethical manner ensures one's gradual progress on the path. The following quotation from David J. Kalupahana's book, Buddhist Philosophy explains this idea well.

"It may not be far from the truth to say that this attitude of renunciation is behind every moral virtue. Not only those who leave everyday life and embrace the life of a monk, but everyone is expected to practice renunciation to the extent to which he is able. Without such sacrifices, there cannot be perfect harmony in society. Thus, even the simplest of virtues, such as generosity, liberality, caring for one's parents, family, fellow beings and others cannot be practiced without an element of renunciation or sacrifice. This is the 'sacrifice' the Buddha emphasized."