

Why BUDDHISM in Today's Society?

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"Buddhism has the characteristics of what would be expected in a cosmic religion for the future: it transcends a personal God, avoids dogmas and theology; it covers both the natural and spiritual, and it is based on a religious sense aspiring from the experience of all things, natural and spiritual, as a meaningful unity" Albert Einstein

Everyone seeks happiness while trying to avoid suffering. This is the foundation that Buddhism is based upon. All beings seek this, from the smallest, insignificant insect to the more complex human being. If we seek this then we must make it available to others. One can avoid certain types of suffering by doing good deeds. These good deeds are those that eventually help us and others avoid suffering as well as achieve happiness. As the law of Karma explains, by doing these deeds one will create positive results that they will reap in the future and, as a result, avoid being born into unfortunate circumstances. So helping others avoid suffering and achieve happiness is a sure way to achieve one's own happiness.

Dependent arising is the other foundation of Buddhism. According to dependent arising, things exist depending on causes and conditions. In the absence of an understanding of dependent arising ignorance arises. On a practical level, ignorance is the deep-rooted, mistaken view that one is self-existent and not dependent on others. Wisdom is the understanding and realisation of the non-existence of this inherently existent self. Therefore, along with the actions benefiting others, the practices that

diminish and finally destroy this mistaken view are all-important. It is often said that benefiting others and doing practice to tackle the wrong view of an inherently existent self are like the two wings of a bird flying on the path to enlightenment. Obviously the bird cannot fly if it has only one wing. These two practices help and support each other. Forgetting oneself in serving others helps to ebb away the self while reflecting on the emptiness of the self helps to diminish attachment, decrease self-centred actions and at the same time increase one's compassion. This compassion is the result of the unbearable feeling for those who have to undergo intense suffering all because of wrongly believing in something that does not really exist (the inherently existing self). In reality we cannot have boundless compassion if we are still ignorant. That is because we still believe in a self and as such will seek to protect it at the expense of others.

Our modern civilised life generates many problems, making it difficult for our minds to find peace. More so than ever, now is the time we need a way of life and a viewpoint that closely reflect reality so as to create happiness for ourselves and those around us. Buddhism has the ability to meet this need because it maintains that suffering has its causes, and as such can be removed. More importantly, Buddhism sets forth methods that everyone, through their own efforts, can use to eliminate the roots of all suffering and achieve ultimate happiness. Therefore, the more complicated life becomes, the more relevant Buddhism will be.

The world of today has shrunk in size. A plethora of information is readily available at our fingertips; we are able to communicate instantaneously with those on the opposite side of the world; we are able to travel to other parts of the world quickly through modern means of transport. As such the citizens of the world today are becoming more interdependent. Something that affects people in one region will in turn affect those in other regions. For example, the recent Katrina hurricane in the US did not only cause extreme destruction and grief to the local population but has also had the flow-on effect of increasing world oil prices as it ceased the production of oil in the region. Consequently, motorists in other parts of the world have had to pay higher petrol prices. The shrunken world and globalisation have proved an important corollary of the doctrine of dependent arising: We cannot live in isolation but must depend on countless other factors such as other people and the environment. Thus, even from a purely worldly view, we should take care of other people and the environment as their wellbeing directly affects that of ours.

The three most important events in Buddha's life – his birth, enlightenment, and death – all took place in nature, under a tree. Is this not an implication that we should respect and protect the environment? Whatever way we look at it, we have to admit that we could not survive without our natural environment. If we want to sustain our lives we need suitable conditions of temperature and atmosphere so that we can have air, water, vegetation and food. Our life totally depends on the environment and therefore, we must protect it. A carefully managed ecological system will sustain life and help maintain our standard of living for the present as well as for future generations.

Buddhism does not believe in a society dictated by class. Buddha taught that all people are born with the same potential and as such it is our past and present actions that will dictate what we will be and what circumstances we will find ourselves in. He believed that no compassion could exist in a society that supported a caste system or promoted sexist behaviour. It was also Buddha who first raised the status of women in society over two and a half millennia ago. This was unheard of back in ancient times, where women merely existed to serve men. Only in the mid to late 20th century did feminism begin to be championed and women's rights and role in society were being challenged. Still, in many parts of the world today, women are considered second-class citizens. Gender has never been a barrier to purification or service in Buddhism. Buddha believed that men and women both held the same potential to do good and as such reach enlightenment. With this in mind, Buddha established the order of Bhikkhunis. In this order, despite their ranking in society, queens, princesses, daughters of noble families, widows, bereaved mothers, helpless women, courtesans met on a common footing, enjoying consolation, peace and equal access to the teachings. This allowed women to hasten their journey to enlightenment.

Buddhism can tackle the greed of today's world. Today's society is based upon consumerism. What we buy is dictated by the marketing and advertising power of firms through mediums that we cannot escape in our daily existence: television, newspapers, billboards. Everywhere we venture we are confronted with images compelling us as to what is desirable for us to have. We work longer hours now, see less of our family and friends and can spend less doing actual good as we become tied to mortgages and other financial obligations for items we do not really need. We become increasingly attached to material comforts. Many people

believe that they are nothing without these material possessions. They believe that these things bring them dignity and happiness.

However, the actuality is that all it does is tie us to things that cannot bring us true dignity and happiness. Buddhism believes in non-attachment. As we accumulate more material comforts, we crave more. This quest for material satisfaction prevents us from pursuing spiritual practice and doing actual good for others. Instead we become obsessed with purchasing the best car on the market, living in a larger house in more affluent surroundings, being able to watch television on a larger, flatter screen. We squander this precious potential in this quest of utmost superficiality.

This greed also stems from a lack of compassion. This can be witnessed through the developed world's exploitation of poorer, third world nations. Large corporations set up branches in these poorer nations, exploiting them of their resources then moving on to the next area after it has exhausted its host nation's resources. Not only do these companies deprive the poor countries of their resources but in many instances leave less than desirable by-products such as pollution, waste and social evils. This practice greatly benefits developed nations but does little to increase the wellbeing of the host nation's population.

Indeed, there is a level of comfort offered in today's world. With the advent of new technology and inventions, our life has been made more comfortable but what is the price we have to pay for this luxury? Buddhism maintains that there should be material comfort but this comfort should be shared equally among the people of the world and not be achieved at the expense of other's basic necessities and through the destruction of the environment.

Buddhism is not a religion in its strict sense, which is understood to be "a system of faith and worship" owing allegiance to a supernatural god. Buddha warned people not to accept blind faith but rather learn through their own experience. Buddhism is, as the Buddha said, a "come-and-see dharma", that is to say verifiable in reality and through practice. It encourages independent thought, questioning and empowers people. Buddha did not ask his followers to accept his teachings merely because they were his words but he advised them to test his teachings just as a scientist tests their theories. Buddha made no use of fear or distorted views regarding natural phenomena to support his religion. He did not believe in self-torture, or the imposition of penalties or commandments in the building up of

Buddhism. His teachings are based on human nature and logic. This scientific method and middle-way viewpoint are the main reasons for the growing appeal of Buddhism in the world today.

Buddhism is not based on love for God but is based on loving kindness and compassion directed towards all sentient beings. Because loving kindness and compassion are generated in our heart when we deeply reflect on the fact that every sentient being fervently seeks happiness and does everything to avoid suffering, they are based on reason and encompasses all sentient beings. It is for this reason that this kind of love is always genuine and beneficial.

Most religions are God-centred, where God is the highest being, bestowing happiness to his children. Buddhism, on the other hand, says that both temporary and ultimate happiness lies in the hands of each individual. Buddhism is human-centred. In Buddhism humans are would-be Buddhas because humans have the limitless potential for improvement and eventually reach enlightenment and become Buddhas themselves. Other systems of beliefs claim that God trials people of this world in various ways, testing some more harshly than others. This seems unjust to many people. How can God allow such disasters as the Asian tsunami of last year to kill and cause grief to so many people? Why do some people have to endure fear as endless fighting and wars surround them while others live in stable, relatively peaceful regions? Why do some people suffer the indignity of not having enough to eat to survive while others have so much to eat that they become obese? Buddhism seeks to explain this through the law of Karma, that is the law of cause and effect. Everything in nature follows this law and as such it only makes sense that the fruits of our actions follow the same rules. For every positive deed that one performs, positive results ensue and for every negative deed that one carries out, negative results follow. The fruits of one's actions will eventually be reaped, either in this life or a future one. So in essence, it is the individuals who, through their



actions, create their own circumstances. This viewpoint on justice is fair, sensible, understandable and easily accepted in this age of reasoning.

Buddhism is based on compassion. Compassion gives rise to non-violence and non-harm. Buddhism has never sought to protect its religion or sought conversion through violent means. This is especially relevant today when religious and racial intolerance is causing widespread violence in the world. No sacred place has been reddened with the blood of innocent women and children, no sincere thinkers have been burnt alive, and no countries have been colonised in the name of Buddhism. Buddha's boundless kindness not only applied to humans but extended to animals as well. Buddha taught that no person had the right to destroy the life of another, as life is precious to all. Since life is precious to all then one should not act in any way that would increase the suffering or reduce the life of other sentient beings. Practising this doctrine is the foundation on which to create a harmonious ecological system and a peaceful world, the legitimate aspirations and the urgent needs of the world today.

As such Buddhism is a humanist religion. Its foundation rests upon its belief in the potential of humans to do good. This positive, joyous view means that all sentient beings, through their own efforts, have the potential to become Buddhas. In a world with so many problems as ours today, there is no doubt that Buddhism is becoming increasingly relevant.

Cát-Tường

(Xin đón đọc bản dịch bằng Việt Ngữ của người Phật tử trẻ tuổi Cát-Tường trong báo HD14)

Danh Sách Ủng Hộ Báo Hương Đạo

Cô Phước Thuần	50
Phật Tử ẩn danh	20
Phật Tử ẩn danh	20
Du Hai	50
Andy Bùi	20
Minh Quyên Kha	100
Nguyễn Hữu Đôn	20
Bác Sĩ Tuấn	100
Thảo Phạm	20
Hoa Quang	20