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JUSTICE IN BUDDHISM

by Ven. Dr. M. Vajiragnana

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JUSTICE IN BUDDHISM

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The word 'Justice' is wrongly interpreted and improperly understood today. The powerful man is regarded as just, and the weak as unjust; the victor or the winner is just, and the defeated is unjust. After a war, war criminals are all on the defeated side; those who are on the victorious side have not committed any crime. This is how justice and injustice are interpreted today. The winners decide what is right and what is wrong. Therefore, the defeated are said to be unjust and criminals. This is a fact.

The concept of justice can be considered on two levels - that of the individual and that of society.

On the individual level Buddhism teaches us that we are entirely responsible for the consequences of our own actions and indeed, that our present circumstances are the just consequences

of actions which we have performed in the past. "If one speaks or acts with a defiled mind, then suffering follows on even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught ox..... If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one as one's shadow that does not leave one." (Dhp. 1/2) This is the concept of Kamma, which is a Pali term more widely known by its Sanskrit equivalent - Karma. This means literally "action" and refers primarily to volition, which is then translated into acts of mind, speech and body.

Not everything that happens is the result of Kamma, but Kamma is one of the five Laws of Cosmic Order (Niyama Dhamma). It is a natural law like the force of gravity, the changing of the seasons or the growth of a tree from a seed. These take place whether we want them to or not. Kamma operates without the intervention of any external, independent, ruling agency. Wholesome actions produce wholesome effects, unwholesome actions produce unwholesome effects. It is a natural law of justice, which has nothing to do with the idea of punishment or reward meted out by an omniscient and omnipotent law-giver, or even an all-compassionate Buddha. The cause produces the effect, the effect explains the cause. Action causes reaction. Kamma is always just, never unjust, it neither loves nor hates, is never angry with us or pleased. Kamma knows nothing about us; it is like fire - just burns.

Thus, we ourselves are entirely responsible for the state we are in. "By oneself the evil is not done, and by oneself one becomes pure. The pure and the impure come from oneself; no man can

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purify another." (Dhp. 16). We are free to mould our present and our future. This is neither fatalism, nor predestination. The past influences the present, but does not determine it. We build our own heavens and we build our own hells, but justice does prevail.

Turning now to the concept of justice in its broader, social context, Buddhism gives the term an unusually wide and deep meaning when it comes to settling world issues. Buddhism never admits any means which justifies violence in any form or bloody revolution to bring about a just social order. It clearly defines as just those deeds that are free from violence and conducive to the welfare and happiness of the individual and society.

Man is responsible for society. It is he who makes it good or bad through his own actions. Buddhism, therefore, advocates a five-fold disciplinary code for man's training in order to maintain justice in society. This code is to be observed on a voluntary basis by individuals as the minimum moral obligations of lay Buddhists.

These are complete abstention from all acts of violence, from destruction of any form of life; abstention from all forms of breach of trust, bribery, corruption, cheating and misappropriation; abstention from sexual offences; abstention from falsehood, slander, defamation, gossip, false information; and abstention from intoxicants which cause disorderly behaviour. These five which are known as precepts are extremely important fundamental principles for promoting and perpetuating human welfare, peace and justice.

Buddhism advocates that one should always take into consideration the example to be learned from the experience of others, "Here am I, fond of my life, not wanting to die, fond of pleasure and averse to pain. Suppose someone should rob me of my life (fond of life as I am and not wanting to die, fond of pleasure and averse to pain), it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful not wanting to die, one fond of pleasure and averse from pain, it would not be a thing pleasing or delightful to him. For a state that is not pleasant or delightful to me must be so to him also: and a state that is not pleasing or delightful to me, - how could I inflict that upon another? As a result of such reflection he himself abstains from taking the life of creatures and he encourages others so to abstain, and speaks in praise of so abstaining. Thus, as regards bodily conduct he is utterly pure." (Kindred Saying v, P. 308) So as regards conduct in speech and mental attitude he makes himself pure and encourages others to do so. Thus, Buddhist five precepts alone, if practised consciously, are capable of establishing justice and fair-play in society.

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We must all abide by the rules of social obligations to maintain a just society. Each one of us has a role to play in sustaining and promoting social justice and orderliness. The Buddha explained very clearly these roles as reciprocal duties existing between parents and children; teachers and pupils; husband and wife; friends, relatives and neighbours; employer and employee; clergy and laity. (Sigala-sutta, Digha Nikaya, No. 31). No one has been left out. The duties explained here are reciprocal and are considered as sacred duties, for - if observed - they can create a just, peaceful and harmonious society.

The Buddha was very clear on political matters which concern a just government. According to him, if a country is to have peace and justice, the ruler should have a high standard of moral virtue.

There are ten qualities explained in Buddhism which make a ruler of a government just. They are called the tenfold governing-qualities (dasarajadhamma) for they make a ruler or a government just. Generosity (dana) is the first. The ruler should not crave for wealth and property, but should give it away for the welfare of his subjects. It is this quality which makes him work for the wellbeing of the people, introducing tax relief for the needy and subsidised schemes where necessary. A high moral integrity (sila) is the second quality, which means that he should not destroy life, steal and exploit others, commit adultery, utter falsehood and take intoxicants. This keeps him free from corruption. The pure moral character of a leader gives him a position of high authority and his subjects maintain full confidence in him. A sense of commitment (paaiccaga) is the third one, which makes him sacrifice his personal comfort, name and fame, even his life, in the interest of the people. Honesty and integrity (ajjava) is the fourth one. All his dealings must be carried out without any trace of fear of favour. He must be sincere in his intentions, and he must not deceive the public. Kindness and gentleness (maddava) is the fifth quality, which makes

him refined in his manners and free from arrogance, so that people can approach him. The sixth quality is self-control (tapa) which makes him lead a simple life and be considerate in making decisions. Not being easily moved by anger (akkodha) is the seventh quality. He should bear no grudge against anybody. Non-violence (avihimsa) is the eighth quality which helps him take a harmless attitude in settling all issues. Also, this quality induces him to promote peace by avoiding and preventing war, and anything which involves violence and destruction of life. Forbearance (kanti) is the ninth quality, which makes the person understanding and toleraant. He must be able to bear hardship, difficulties and insults without losing his temper. The tenth quality is non-vindictiveness (avirodhata), which makes him free from taking revenge on those who criticise him or oppose him. He should rule in harmony with his people. These are the qualities which make a ruler or a government just.

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