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THE IDEAL ULTIMATE GOAL IN LIFE
IN THE EARLY BUDDHISM

What does Buddhism teach? Does it teach us to live as laymen? Or does it instruct us to renounce the world to become religious practitioners? The two standpoints of the lives contradict each other, and they are incompatible each other. If Buddhism teaches two contradictory ideals, it can create confusion among people.

There had already been existing a criticism against the lives of Buddhist religious practitioners who renounced the world. A youth called Subha (possibly a *Brahmin*) told the Blessed One¹.

“Good Gotama, *brahmins* talk thus: «A householder is accomplishing the right path, what is skilled; one who has gone forth is not accomplishing right path, *dhamma*, what is skilled”. What does the good Gotama say to this?»² (MN, vol. II, p. 197).

In short, there was a criticism against Buddhist monks who abandoned those worldly duties that Brahmins faithfully upheld. This is what the Indian philosopher Kumābila and later Confucianists in China and Japan also pointed out.

¹ MN, No. 99, *Subhasutta*; 『中阿含經』第38卷 (*Taisho Tripitaka*, Vol. I, 667a). We also find a same kind of story in *SN*, XLV, 24 (Vol.V, pp.18-19).

² “*gahaṭṭho ārādhako hoti ñāyaṃ dhammaṃ kusalaṃ; na pabbajito ārādhako hoti ñāyaṃ dhammaṃ kusalaṃ*”. Here “*gahaṭṭha*” means the Sanskrit “*grhastha*”, the second stage in the *Ashrama* system. It is significant to find a Brahmanical jargon has been used in it; I. B. HORNER, *Middle Length Sayings*, II, PTS, p. 386.

Against such criticism Shakyamuni answers, "On this point, I, *brahman* youth, discriminate (*vibhajjavāda*), on this point I do not speak definitely (*ekāṃsavāda*). I, *brahman* youth, do not praise a wrong course in either a householder or one who has gone forth. If, *brahman* youth, either a householder or one who has gone forth is faring along wrongly, then as a result and consequence of his wrong course he is not accomplishing the right path, *dhamma*, what is skilled. But I, *brahman* youth, praise a right course (*sammāpaṭipatti*) both for a householder and for one who has gone forth. If, *brahman* youth, either a householder or one who has gone forth is faring along rightly, then as a result and consequence of his right course he is accomplishing the right path, *dhamma*, what is skilled"³.

According to this view, what is important is to conduct right course of actions. Whether one is a householder or the one who has renounced the world is not an important criterion. What then is the "right course" (*sammāpaṭipatti*)? Are there any difference in the contents of "right course" in the case of a householder and that of the one who renounced the world?

Without providing any definite answer to such question, in some place of the scripture, after briefly stating the above mentioned question, it is mentioned that the right path (*sammāpaṭipadā*) is the Noble Eightfold Path⁴.

In one place, it states that the nature of the path of a householder and that of the homeless differs, but that the ultimate goal is practically the same. A householder actions need great effort and labor. Once he accomplishes, he gets great fruit. The action of the one who renounced the world do not need much of effort. But once he accomplishes, he also gets great fruit. Both of them receives "great fruit and great merit". The former is compared to cultivation, and the latter to the commerce.

What would then become to a householder who accomplished the ideal life as a householder? In old verses, it is often stated that

³ I. B. HORNER, *Ibid.*, pp.386-387.

⁴ *SN*. Vol. V, p. 19.

those laymen who lived the right lives could enjoy the ease of the heavenly world⁵. In the prose section, it is systematically talked like the following⁶:

Fulfilling the four conditions (i.e., 1) achievement of alertness: devote oneself to one's occupation, 2) achievement in wariness: safeguarding one's property and wealth, 3) achievement of good company: having good friends and 4) achievement of even life: live a well-balanced life) will increase the advantage in this very life, and it will lead to the attainment of happiness on earth. Whereas, the following four conditions bring the benefits and happiness in the world to come. The four conditions are: 1) achievement in faith: maintaining Faith (*saddhā*) in the *bodhi* of the *tathagata* and in the fact that the Exalted One is the *buddha*; 2) achievement in virtue: maintaining precepts (*sīla*), i.e. maintaining the five precepts; 3) achievement in charity and 4) achievement in wisdom (*paññā*).

The last three elements are included in the Six Perfection (Six *Pāramitās*) of the Mahāyāna Buddhism. What is significant is that the four conditions brings "advantages and happiness in the world to come" to those who implements them. As the expression of saying a certain action brings the advantages and happiness on this world and in the world to come can be found in the inscriptions of Aśoka, we may be able to consider that such ideas could have existed at the time of the Buddha.

However, in some place, it is said that a lay-follower who lives a right course of life ultimately attains Nirvāṇa: "Good Gotama, as the river Ganges, sliding towards the sea, tending towards the sea, inclining towards the sea, stands knocking at the sea, even so this company of the good Gotama, comprising householders and those that have gone forth, sliding towards a *nibbāna*, tending towards *nibbāna*, inclining towards *nibbāna*, stands knocking at *nibbāna*"⁷.

Whichever *varṇa* men may belong to, "if they dwell in

⁵ Cf. HAJIME NAKAMURA, *Genshi Bukkyo no Shiso*, vol. I (Vol. XV of the Selected Works of Hajime Nakamura), Shunjusha Co. Ltd., Tokyo.

⁶ *AN*, VIII, 54., vol IV, pp.281-285, 『雜阿含經』第4卷 (*Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. II, pp. 23a-c).

⁷ *MN.*, vol. I, p. 493; I.B. HORNER, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

dhamma, maintain the precepts, speak the truth, know the shame, break the life and death, complete the pure actions,.....they go forth to the heavenly world, or they take birth in good families in this world, and they attain *nibbāna* one by one.”⁸

We cannot make out if the ancients considered attaining heavenly world was the previous stage before attaining *nibbāna* or not. Nor can we guess if they considered attaining heavenly world and *nibbāna* as the separate thing or not. Generally speaking, many texts reflect a fact that attaining heaven was considered to be the previous stage of attaining *nibbāna*. And later on, it came to be formulated that the practicing of *dāna* and *sīla* leads to the attainment of heaven⁹.

Sometimes, attaining heaven is not clearly mentioned, as in the case of faithful Gathikāra, a potter. He is referred to as “by the destruction of the five fetters binding to this lower (shore), is of spontaneous uprising, he attains final *nibbāna* there, he is not liable to return from that world.”¹⁰ Though it is not mentioned clearly, taking birth in heaven could also have been meant in it.

However, in a certain case, it is mentioned that a bed-ridden lay-devottee with wisdom can attain *nibbāna*, if he frees his mind from his mother, father, wife, children and all the objects of his greed and if he meditates upon heavenly world, the world beyond Brahma world, while wishing extinction of his own body.¹¹ According to this teaching, even a bed ridden householder can attain *nibbāna*.

“I say that there is no difference in “*vimutti*” in the case of a householder who attained *vimutti* of mind and a monk who freed himself from the defilement of mind.”¹²

⁸ 『別訳雜阿含經』第 1 3 卷 (*Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. II, pp. 465c-466a); *AN*, vol. III, p. 214G.

⁹ Such formula occurs often in the prose portion of the scriptures.

¹⁰ “*Ghatikāro kumbhakāro pañcannaṃ ovambhāgiyānaṃ saṃyojanānaṃ parikkhayā opapātiko tattha parinibbāyi anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā*”. *MN*, vol. II, p. 52; I.B. HORNER, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 248.

¹¹ *SN*, 55, 54. vol. V. pp.408-410; 『雜阿含經』第 4 1 卷 (*Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. II, pp. 546b-546c).

¹² *SN*, vol. V, p. 410.

Besides there is a case where a householder considers three stages before attaining *nibbāna*.¹³ Some *upāsakas* or *upāsikās* may attain “spontaneous generation, one that has attained *nibbāna* there, not liable to return from that world.”¹⁴ Other *upāsakas* or *upāsikās* are to “come back once only to the world, will make an end of anguish.”¹⁵ Yet other *upāsakas* and *upāsikās* are “stream-attainer, not liable to the Downfall, assured, bound for enlightenment.”¹⁶ Here, three stages are conceived. The ultimate stage is the perfect *nibbāna* of not returning back to this world. This is the direct reflection of ancient Upanishadic and Jain thought. As in the Upanishadic thought, where we find an idea that even a householder can attain the ultimate stage of not returning back any more, it is not strange to find such concept in the Buddhist scripture. In the Buddhist scripture, it is mentioned that a householder should meditate oneself upon the “state of being as it is” (*tathatta*), which makes him attain “Comfort and Ease” (*phāsuvihāra*). [In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the idea of me-ditating upon “Suchness” (*tathatā*) came to be emphasised].

However, in Early Buddhism, the idea of the existence of the ultimate stage of Arhathood above the three stages came to be prevalent. This led to the next problem: Whether a householder can attain Arhathood or not? Regarding this, difference in opinion came to be obvious even within the orthodox Buddhist tradition. The *Uttarāpathakas* recognized that *arahā* can be attained even while having householders’ nature. However, in the conservative *Theravādas*, now spread in South Asian countries, went against this point of view¹⁷.

What then was the stand-point in the earliest stage of

¹³ MN, No. 68, vol. I, pp. 467-468; 『阿含經』第18卷 (*Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. II, pp. 646b-546c).

¹⁴ “*opāpatiko tatthaparinihbāyi anāvattidhammo tasmā lokā ti.*”; I.B. HORNER, *op. cit.*, vol. II., p. 140.

¹⁵ “*sakadāgami, sakid eva imaṃ lokaṃ āgantvā duhass’ antaṃ karissatī ti.*”; I. B. HORNER, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ “*sotāpanno avinipātadhammo niyato sambadhiparāyano ti.*”; I.B. HORNER, *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Kathavatthu*, vol. I, pp. 267-268.

Buddhism? In the earliest stage, it appears that this problem was not deeply thought about. For example, we find only a few references on *nibbāna* in the earliest sections of Buddhist scriptures. We only find simple and unelaborate expressions on the heaven. The idea of *nibbāna* was borrowed from contemporary Indian religions, like Jainism. The concept of heaven was also borrowed from the same sources. As Buddhism did not preach metaphysics, these concepts were also the expediencies. The Buddhists of the earliest days did not matter how the ultimate ideal state of liberation was termed.

We can find several evidences to testify such tendencies in fairly later stratum of scriptures. Buddha preaches to a village headman:

“Since the lustful man, because of his lust, directs thought to his own harm, directs thought to the harm of others to the harm both of himself and of others, but when lust is abandoned directs thought neither to his own harm nor to that of others, nor of both, – thus these (results) belong to this life, they are undecaying, not subject to them, inviting to come and see, leading onward (to *Nibbāna*), to be realized each for himself by the wise.”¹⁸

After hearing the same kind of statement on anger and delusion, the village headman took refuge in the Buddha and he became a *upāsaka*. Here, the ideal state of mind was explained to the village headman, a householder, by employing Jain term “*nijjarā*” (undecaying). This term “*nijjarā*” is another case of the expediency. For laymen, the ultimate ideal state of mind cannot be expressed in words, and it is to be realized through their own experiences.

Such view continued to be maintained even in the later stage of the Early Buddhism. After listing up 21 famous lay-devotees of the Buddha’s time, it is mentioned, “he is the lay-devotee served the *tathāgata*, who has attained the ultimate (*niṭṭha*), who has seen the non-death (*amata*), and who acts while proving non-death.”¹⁹

¹⁸ *SN*, vol. IV, pp. 339-340; P. L. WOODWARD, *Kindred Sayings*, Vol. IV, p. 243.

¹⁹ *AN*, vol. V, pp. 450-451.

Referring to the ultimate state of mind as “*amata*” was a general practice among various religious traditions in the contemporary society. Buddhism too merely followed the practice. Besides, in the ancient *suttas*, the case of the ultimate state being called “*nibbhana*” is not many. Rather, it is referred to as “*amata*” more.

If we observe such tendency, we may be able to consider that how the ideal state to be called was not important for the ancient Buddhists. In their society, there existed two ways of life: a way of life of householders and that of those who had renounced the world. For the emergence of such two ways, there could have existed certain socio-economic causes which yielded and fostered them. As the two ways of life were the actual happenings of the then society, we feel. Buddhism merely recognized and accepted the two ways of life as they were, and Buddhism preached the ideal ultimate state to those who lived in the two ways of life accordingly. It appears, what was important for the householders was to live their very life righteously, while aiming to achieve what they considered the ideal ultimate state* .

[Translated by Dr. Takahida Takahashi from Japanese into English]