

BUDDHISM’S COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN DEVELOPMENT: OVERCOMING CHALLENGES OF POST-COVID 19 PANDEMIC

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Now once again the entire world is reemerging very slowly and cautiously from the fractured wounds of post-Covid economic recessions and political struggles. Within the last three years of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost all standards of safe and healthy living around us appear to have gradually gone down. The decline of morals of fellow humans, an increase in selfish tendencies among us and aggressive manoeuvres in politics and dramatic changes in personal lives in social settings, and sky-rocketing inflation combined with price increases of essential items have undoubtedly created visible fractures around us creating many forms of existential *dukkha* (pain). The vicissitudes around us also indicate that we have not learned enough from the difficulties that we confronted during the Covid-19 pandemic. It seems we have completely forgotten the fact of “uncertainty” of human life (a key Buddhist insight) that we also experienced on a personal level day-and-day during the pandemic.

This paper examines Buddhism’s commitment to social and humanitarian development. The historical Buddha’s “Great Commission” becomes the cornerstone of Buddhism’s commitment to social welfare and humanitarian development. The Buddha instructed his first sixty awakened disciples: “*Caratha bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujana hitāya . . .* (Monks, wander around for the welfare of many . . . , *Pāra Sutta* of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, S.I.106). The paper argues that rather than “selfishness” associated often very closely with Buddhism’s advocacy of self-improvement and self-perfection of the individual, it is altruism and compassionate thoughts embedded in many Buddhist narratives that make possible social and humanitarian development even today. As a twentieth-century letter written by a Sri Lankan Buddhist to the Pali Text Society, London on the eve of Buddha Jayantī (1956) requesting to reprint the *Jātakas* that highlight and inculcate the values of altruism over the printing of *Vinaya* texts proposed by the PTS is a poignant case that shows that the Buddhist tradition has admired and advocated social and humanitarian development perhaps as a utilitarian ideal for Buddhist practitioners.

Keywords: *Altruism, Buddha Jayantī, Covid-19, Jātakas, Pali Text Society, Selfishness, Social & Humanitarian Development, Welfare*

Introduction

Now once again the entire world is reemerging very slowly and cautiously from the fractured wounds of post-Covid economic recessions and political struggles. Within the last three years of the Covid-19 pandemic,¹ almost all standards of safe and healthy living around us appear to have gone down gradually. The decline of morals of fellow humans, an increase in selfish tendencies among us and aggressive manoeuvres in politics and dramatic changes in personal lives in social settings, and sky-rocketing inflation combined with price increases of essential items have undoubtedly created visible fractures around us creating many forms of *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, pain). The vicissitudes around us also indicate that we have not learned enough from the difficulties that we confronted during the Covid-19 pandemic. It seems we have completely forgotten the uncertainty of human life that we once confronted during the pandemic.

This paper examines Buddhism's commitment to social and humanitarian development.² Briefly considering the historical Buddha's "Great Commission", the paper argues that rather than "selfishness" associated often very closely with Buddhism's advocacy of self-improvement and self-perfection of the individual, it is altruism and compassionate thoughts embedded in many Buddhist narratives that make possible social and humanitarian development even today. A twentieth-century letter written by a Sri Lankan Buddhist to the Pali Text Society, London on the eve of Buddha Jayantī (1956) requesting to reprint the *Jātakas* illustrates highlighting the importance of inculcating the values of altruism over the printing of *Vinaya* texts³ proposed by the PTS. The choice of a popular Theravada text is indeed a poignant case that shows that the Buddhist tradition has admired and advocated social and humanitarian development perhaps as a utilitarian ideal for Buddhist practitioners.

I. THE BUDDHA'S COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN DEVELOPMENT

The historical Buddha's "Great Commission" becomes the cornerstone of Buddhism's commitment to social welfare and humanitarian development. After gathering around the first sixty awakened disciples, the historical Buddha (563–483 BCE) instructed them with an important message, which is relevant to us even today when we consider

¹ According to World Health Organization, the total confirmed Covid-19 deaths as of 10 May 2023 were 766,440,796. <https://covid19.who.int/?mapFilter=cas>

² On a related topic, *Buddhism and Humanitarian Law*, have been a project of the International Committee of the Red Cross since the launch of an international conference in Daṁbulla, Sri Lanka in September 2019. Some of the academic papers of the Daṁbulla conference have been recently published in *Contemporary Buddhism* 22 (1–2) 2021.

³ However, note that this proposition from the A.B. Gomes Trust should not be taken as a Sri Lankan deemphasis on the *Vinaya*. For example, the Buddha Jayantī Tripiṭaka Granthamālā commenced in the mid-1950s, with an emphasis on the *Vinaya*. The first to appear in print in the series in 1957 was the *Mahāvagga Pāḷi*, vol. II (Buddha Jayantī Tripiṭaka Granthamālā No. 4). It is also notable that the Pālmaḍulla Dharma Saṅgāyanā held in Sabaragamuva Province in 1868 had rehearsed only the recitation of the *Vinaya*.

Buddhism and its value in promoting social and humanitarian development after the devastating Covid-19 pandemic. The Buddha addressed his maiden disciples gathered around him: “*Caratha bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujana hitāya . . .* (Monks, wander around for the welfare of many . . .”⁴ The Buddha’s instruction was simple and clear: “Do not go on the same path.” He advocated travelling for the welfare of the many. This first message of the Buddha is relevant forever. A key point in that instruction is that the Buddha reminded Buddhist monastics and Buddhists of their unwavering commitment to social and humanitarian welfare. The Buddha’s first message shows that humanitarian development and social welfare were at the heart of the historical Buddha’s message. This powerful instruction of the Buddha was the key guiding principle that enabled Buddhism to become one of the three prominent world religions today.

II. HOW DOES BUDDHISM BALANCE ONE’S WELFARE WITH THE WELFARE OF OTHERS?

The issue of selfishness (one’s welfare) and altruism (others’ welfare) has become a key ethical dilemma in religious, philosophical as well as contemporary political debates. Buddhism appears to suggest a solution to this binary analysis of today’s moral discourses. The Pāli canon contains a four-fold classification of a person/individual determined on the basis of both selfishness (one’s welfare) and altruism (others’ welfare). The term translated here as “welfare” corresponds to the Pāli term “*hita*”.

Rather than seeing it as a binary, the Buddhist texts in the Pāli canon demonstrate a closer and more useful link between one’s welfare and the other’s welfare. Texts attempt to transcend the apparent binary oppositions in those two key concepts—*attahita* (one’s welfare) and *parahita* (others’ welfare). To facilitate a nuanced understanding of the fourfold classification discussed below, it is worth considering wider meanings of the Pāli term *hita* (welfare). In general, the term *hita* means “welfare or well-being”. Its dominant meaning concerns ensuring material or economic conditions are safeguarded. Because of the emphasis on moral training and the importance of morality for the Buddhist path, it is possible to interpret “*hita*” including a moral sense to it.

In contemporary moral philosophy as well as in philosophical discourses of Buddhism, there are broader issues today that concern us. Debates on the function, value, and importance that we assign to selfishness and altruism have come to the front in (re)considering agents’ motives in providing aid/humanitarian aid and involvement in charities and philanthropic work worldwide. Celebrities have come under attack for their ulterior motives in aid work and charitable activities.

The notion of no-self (P. *anattā*) and the doctrine of interdependent origination (P. *paṭiccasamuppāda*) play key roles in the Buddhist philosophical visions of both selfishness and altruism. One authoritative and crucial canonical passage in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* (A.II.218–219) states a key idea illustrating how one’s work for one’s welfare as well as that of others becomes far superior to another’s work merely for enhancing one’s welfare.

⁴ *Pāra Sutta* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, S.I.106; other places include *Vinaya* I.21 and D.II.6–54.

The *Anguttara Nikāya* introduces a useful fourfold classification of individual persons:

- (i) The individual who pursues neither one's welfare nor that of others (*na attahitāya ca paṭinno na parahitāya ca*);
- (ii) The individual who pursues others' welfare but not one's welfare;
- (iii) The individual who pursues one's welfare but not that of others;
- (iv) The individual who pursues one's welfare as well as that of others (A.II.95).

This four-fold classification is structured in ascending order of excellence: the weakest mentioned first and last the best. What is intriguing in this hierarchical structure/typology is why the third individual is better than the second individual who neglects one's welfare. A peculiar Buddhist rationale and conviction appear to undergird this position. The operational rationale appears to recognize and promote the importance of self-perfection as a prerequisite to performing altruistic activities efficiently. Considering this matter, the Buddha's instruction to Cunda appears to provide a clue concerning this specific emphasis.

It is not possible, Cunda, for one who is stuck in the mud to pull out another who is (also) stuck in the mud. But, Cunda, it is possible for one who is not stuck in the mud to pull out another who is stuck in the mud. It is not possible, Cunda, for one who is himself not tamed, not disciplined, with defilements not extinguished to tame and discipline another and help extinguish his defilements (M.I.45).

Two important and relevant points emerge from this quotation. An empirical observation dominates the first: one who is stuck in the mud of (moral and other forms of) depravity, for example, cannot save another who is in the same predicament. On a moral and spiritual level, one who is pursuing one's welfare holds undoubtedly a superior position that enables helping others pursue their welfare.

The benefits of cultivation whether moral or mental are reciprocal. When we strive to make free the mind from unwholesome mental dispositions such as greed and hatred, we actively move in the direction of making them disappear in outward manifestation and thereby preventing them from adversely affecting others around us.

In a similar fashion, once we develop wholesome moral and mental qualities such as generosity, compassion, love, and caring thoughts, we take active steps to create a positive atmosphere around us so that they generate positive outcomes for others living around us. In such cases, the superficial distinctions that we make between our welfare and others' welfare become meaningless.

The Buddha poignantly expressed this transcendence of binaries in the *Samyutta Nikāya* (S.V.169).

Monks, one who takes care of oneself, takes care of others (*attānaṃ rakkhanto paraṃ rakkhati*). One who takes care of others, takes care of oneself. How, monks, is it that one who takes care of oneself takes care of others? It is by moral training (*āsevanāya*), moral culture (*bhāvanāya*), and moral development (*bahulīkamma*). And how, monks, is it that one who takes care of others, takes care of oneself? It is by forbearance (*khantiyā*), by harmlessness (*avihiṃsāya*), by loving-kindness (*mettatāya*), and compassion (*anuddayatāya*) (S.V.169).

A cliché in Buddhism that facilitates this transcendence of binaries is a profound language of non-“I”, non-“me”, and non-“mine” on a doctrinal level.⁵ From the historical Buddha’s point of view, taking an “idea” or “physical object” as “I”, “me”, and “mine” creates a whole series of issues that deviates one from the path of realization and awakening, let alone immense problems both mental and bodily in this very life itself.

Broadly speaking, Buddhist discourses on identity are an “identity-less” discourse. The language and metaphors used in the Buddha’s discourses attempt to go beyond the conceptual realms of notions of identity, self, or ego-centredness. The target had been seeking an elevated position in the “identity-less” realm of knowledge, understanding, and realization. Ultimately speaking, *nirvāṇa*, the *summum bonum* of the Buddhist religious path, maybe the linguistic explanation of that “identity-less” status (or non-status). The absence of ego-centredness can facilitate altruist work.

III. A BUDDHIST CONCERN FOR SOCIAL AND HUMANITARIAN DEVELOPMENT

The year 1956 was a special year for Buddhist societies in South and Southeast Asia. Buddhists of various stripes organized a variety of ceremonies and festivals to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha’s message.⁶ During this period, a new technical term—Buddha Jayantī⁷ (“Year of the Buddha”)—was invented to commemorate the event. Buddha Jayantī became the most memorable and distinct Buddhist celebration in Buddhist societies in the twentieth century.

⁵ The three dimensions discussed in the Buddha’s discourses—“I”, “me” and “mine”—, attempt to fully address the personal dimensions of issues of ego-centredness that lay underneath many human problems.

⁶ On the eve of Buddha Jayantī, for example, in Sri Lanka, the Government of Ceylon initiated the Buddha Jayantī Tripiṭaka project (1954–1989) which published the entire Pāli canon with Sinhala translation consisting of 40 volumes in 57 books. This vernacular edition is known as *Buddha Jayanti Tripiṭaka Granthamālā* and for more details on it, see Mahinda Deegalle, “The Pali Tipitaka in the Vernacular: The Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka” (*The Buddhist CXXXI* (Aug.–Nov.) 2021: 41–49). The Government of Ceylon also undertook the compilation of the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* in addition to other activities (See Mahinda Deegalle’s “The Resurgence of the *Tripiṭaka* in Sri Lanka’s Preoccupations: Ancient and Modern Contributions to the Preservation and Understanding of the *Buddhavaṇana*” (*Dharmayātrā: Felicitation Volume in Honour of Venerable Tampalawela Dhammaratana*, ed. Mahinda Deegalle, Paris: NUVIS éditions, 2022, p. 78). In Burma, there was the Sixth Buddhist Council, Rangoon, held from May 1954 to May 1956. In India, the Nava Nālandā Mahāvihāra commenced the publication of the Pāli Tripiṭaka in Dēvanāgarī characters in 41 volumes.

⁷ “Buddha Jayantī” is not a term found in traditional Buddhist literature. A Sri Lankan Buddhist monk living in India invented the term in the 1930s (for more details, see note 124 in Mahinda Deegalle “The Resurgence of the *Tripiṭaka* in Sri Lanka’s Preoccupations”, p. 99.)

Among the celebrations organized, there was a point that the social, moral, and humanitarian development of Buddhist societies was important. The Pali Text Society established in London in 1881 wanted to celebrate by printing a canonical text to mark the occasion. There was a serious correspondence on that matter between Miss Isaline Blew Horner (1896–1981), President of the Pali Text Society, and Mr. Hema Henry Basnayake (b. 1902), Chief Justice of Ceylon (1956–1964) and who was a key person of A.B. Gomes Trust in Colombo, which sponsored some PTS publications including the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

The publication selected for printing as the PTS Buddha Jayantī publication has some significance and throws some light on the importance of the theme of social and humanitarian development. I will cite below some correspondence between the PTS and A.B. Gomes Trust on the Buddha Jayantī publication.

On 26 March 1955, Hema Henry Basnayake of A.B. Gomes Trust wrote to Miss Isaline Blew Horner of the Pali Text Society,

In regard to your proposal to bring out a Buddha Jayanti publication, I have discussed the matter with Mudaliyar Ratnatunga. We agree that the Jataka series would be more popular with the reading public than the Pali Vinaya Pitaka. We can reserve the Vinaya Pitaka for a later occasion. 1957 is the year of Buddha Jayanti, and it will be fit and proper that the publication should come out in that year.⁸

In response, on 7 April 1955, Horner wrote to Basnayake:

I am very glad to have the agreement of yourself and Mudaliyar Ratnatunga that for a Buddha Jayanti publication it will be suitable to bring out the six volumes of the JATAKA STORIES and the INDEX volume. I will therefore send copies to the printers at once and this will give a very good chance indeed for the books to be ready to come out in 1957. . . . It would be of course [*sic*] be nice to have the Pali Vinaya Pitaka in circulation again, but that must wait a little. I think there is no doubt that the JATAKA translation will make a much wider appeal.⁹

In another letter, on 19 July 1956, Horner wrote to Basnayake again:

Tomorrow we are posting the one set of the JATAKA translation that you wished to have for presentation. It has been out about two months now, and I do hope you will approve of it. It was largely owing to you that the Society made a Buddha Jayanti

⁸ Hema Basnayake's letter to I.B. Horner, 26 March 1955, PT/14/2, Archive Collection of Rhys Davids Family, Pali Scholars at the University of Cambridge.

⁹ I.B. Horner's letter to Hema Basnayake, 7 April 1955, PT/14/2, Archive Collection of Rhys Davids Family, Pali Scholars at the University of Cambridge. The *Jātakas* had a special place in Buddhist lives. It is also noteworthy that Fausbøll's seven volumes—*The Jātakas: Together with Its Commentary Being Tales of the Anterior Births of Gotama Buddha*—were the first significant Pāli Tipiṭaka text to be published in Europe in English translation during 1877–1897, which had commenced even before the founding of the Pali Text Society.

publication, and chose the JATAKA STORIES for this purpose and on your advice tried to get a nice looking binding.¹⁰

The choice of the *Jātakas* over the texts of *Vinaya* becomes obvious here in light of our topic of “Social and Humanitarian Development” in this United Nations Day of Vesak (UNDV) 18th conference in Thailand today. As in previous centuries, in the twentieth century also Buddhists in Sri Lanka saw much potential in the *Jātaka* narratives in boosting morals and encouraging people to get involved in social and humanitarian development. On the eve of Buddha Jayantī in 1956, a group of Sri Lankan Buddhists of A.B. Gomes Trust, Colombo requested the Pali Text Society in London to reprint the *Jātakas* highlights a key Buddhist preoccupation throughout centuries on the theme of the *Jātakas*, ultimately the previous lives of the *bodhisattva* were extremely attractive, appealing and instrumental being effective in social and humanitarian development.

Figure 1

A temple mural of George Keyt (1901–1993) at Gōtamī Vihāra, Colombo depicting the birth of Siddhārtha Gautama in a Sri Lankan postal stamp marking Vesak in 1983

¹⁰ I.B. Horner’s letter to Hema Basnayake, 19 July 1956, PT/14/2, Archive Collection of Rhys Davids Family, Pali Scholars at the University of Cambridge. Earlier on 12 July 1956, Basnayake wrote to Horner: “I should like to have for presentation one set of the Jataka Translation if it is out . . .”

GEORGE KEYT MURALS
GOTAMI VIHARA COLOMBO



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SRI LANKA

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Buddhist revival in the Buddha Jayantī required the renewal of morals, an increase of philanthropy, and an uplifting of the backward areas of Buddhist societies. The *Jātaka* narratives had the potential of renewal and regeneration from the perspective of Colombo elite Buddhists. The *Jātaka* narratives can inculcate effectively the values of altruism among ordinary people. The lessons learnt in the *Jātaka* narratives had the antidote to rampant individualism and selfishness that existed then and are prevalent widely now. The examples in the stories were more holistic in uplifting the ordinary people than the *Vinaya* texts for humanitarian development. The decision of the PTS to publish the *Jātakas* is a poignant case that shows the narratives' power to encourage people for social and humanitarian development. As can be seen in vernacular texts like the *Maitreya Varṇanā* (The Laudatory Account of the Buddha Maitreya),¹¹ the Buddhist tradition in Sri Lanka had advocated social and humanitarian development perhaps as a utilitarian ideal for Buddhist practitioners.

Conclusion

This article has briefly considered the notions of selfishness and altruism. It has discussed how Buddhism addresses the complex issues of one's and other's welfare. Buddhism aimed to transcend the binary oppositions of selfishness and altruism. In the Buddhist case, the boundaries of selfishness and altruism are much more fluid rather than fixed. To illustrate the immense potential and Buddhist commitment to social and humanitarian development, the paper has identified the popularity of the *Jātakas* as a collection of narratives that inculcate virtues and encourage ordinary people to engage in social and humanitarian development. Post-Covid 19 recovery requires the aid of altruism to fix the wounds left behind by quick ruptures caused by the pandemic.

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¹¹ For a brief description of the *Maitreya Varṇanāva*, see Mahinda Deegalle, *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2006), pp. 123–127.

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