

# Humanistic Elements in Early Buddhism and the “Theravāda Tradition”

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper begins with an examination of the different definitions of humanism. Humanism primarily consists of a concern with interests and ideals of human beings, a way of perfection of human personality, a philosophical attitude which places the human and human values above all others, and a pragmatic system (e.g. that of F. C. S. Schiller and William James) which discounts abstract theorizing and concentrates on the knowable and the doable. Early Buddhism, by which is meant the teachings of the Buddha as found in the Pali Canon and the Agama Sutras, is distinguished from other traditions. The paper clarifies the error of equating Early Buddhism with the so-called Theravada Tradition of South and Southeast Asia. Historically, the independent Theravada Tradition with whatever specificity it had in doctrines came to an end when the three Buddhist schools (Mahavihara, Abhayagiri and Jetavana) of Sri Lanka were unified in the twelfth century. What developed since then and spread to South and Southeast Asia is an amalgam of all Buddhist traditions with the Pali Canon and its commentaries as the scriptures. With the reform measures in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the kind of modern Buddhism prevalent as “Theravada” is flexible, tolerant and reinforced by modernizing influence of Western Christian values.*

*The paper analyses references to the Buddha’s own autobiographical statements and other data in the Pali Canon and Commentaries and shows that the Buddha stood as a man before human beings to demonstrate how they could develop themselves by their own effort and reach the end of suffering. This final goal of perfection is within the reach of every human being. Thus Buddhism is a way of perfection of human personality.*

*It is also shown how the Buddha had not confined his teachings purely to his spiritual Path of Liberation but had dealt with matters of day-to-day interest in this life. Listed with ample evidence from scripture are the Buddha’s views on the equality of humanity, the sanctity to human life, and the ethical principles governing lay life. The Buddha’s position on contemporary social issues is discussed with reference to the equality of women in society, the place of mother and wife in family, poverty, youth problems, money and economic success, and government. Dealt with in great detail are interpersonal relations between parents and children, teacher and pupil, wife and husband, friends, and spiritual teacher and disciple. These principles and values are conveyed through a rich and varied narrative literature. They also find representation in Buddhist art, which has been utilized as an aid to teaching ethical values.*

*The paper concludes by highlighting how the humanistic elements of Early Buddhism are preserved and further propagated in modern Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia. It is underscored that the emphasis on merit making has increased the attention given to charity, social and public services and community development. Specially stressed in the Conclusion are the prevalence of lay participation in Vipassana Meditation and the efforts made for the re-establishment of Bhikkhuni Order in Southern Buddhism.*

## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine what elements of humanism are traceable in the earliest known teachings of the Buddha and the practices which he inculcated and to trace how far such elements persist in the tradition of Buddhism which in common parlance is called the "Theravāda."

How the Buddha presented himself to the people of his time and how his disciples perceived him are important to ascertain the veracity of the statement that the "Buddha stood as a human being before human beings to teach a goal of spiritual attainment within the reach of humanity." Did he only preach a way out of life, emphasizing in the process renunciation and total commitment to meditation in isolation, aloof from society and life of the people? Did he also preach to the laity and enable them to reach ethical and spiritual development within family and society? What was his attitude to lay life and secular matters? How concerned was he of such human issues as equality, caste and class privileges, socioeconomic exploitation, gender prejudices, economic viability, government, tolerance and co-existence, violence, security and peace?

The paper will then examine how many of the Buddha's precepts and examples persist in the current teachings and practices of the Southern School of Buddhism as followed by well nigh 200 million Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Vietnam. A brief digression into the history of Buddhism becomes necessary to clarify the meaning and usage of the term *Theravāda*: its general use in current literature is based on a basic misunderstanding that what obtains in these countries is identical with Early Buddhism in every respect.<sup>1</sup> But the main emphasis is on how Buddhism is actually viewed and practiced in South and Southeast Asia today.

Of special interest are the role of the Sangha, the place of the temple in the community, and the part played by the laity and lay organizations. An explanation is to be sought for the leading role which Buddhism plays in the region with regard to literacy and education, sociocultural development, environment and biodiversity, conflict resolution and peace.

## 2. Definition of Humanism and Early Buddhism

An analysis of humanistic elements in Early Buddhism and the Theravada tradition has to begin with the definition of the terms: *Humanism, Early Buddhism and Theravada Tradition*.

### a. What is Humanism?

The relevant definitions of *humanism* in dictionaries are the following:

1. The quality of being human; human nature; any system or way of thought or action concerned with the interests and ideals of people (Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary);

2. The character or quality of being human; a system or attitude in thought, religion etc., in which human ideals and the perfection of human personality are made central, so that cultural and practical interests rather than theology and metaphysics are at the focus of attention (Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary);
3. Position philosophique qui place l'homme et les valeurs humains au-dessus des autres valeurs (Larousse Memo Encyclopedie).
4. The character or quality of being human; devotion to human interests; Any system of thought or action which is concerned with merely human interests (as distinguished from divine), or with those of the human race in general (as distinguished from individual); the 'Religion of Humanity;' A pragmatic system of thought introduced by F. C. S. Schiller and William James which emphasizes that man can only comprehend and investigate what is within the resources of the human mind, and discounts abstract theorizing; so, more generally, implying that technological advance must be guided by awareness of widely understood human needs (Oxford English Dictionary).

Humanism in the case of Buddhism stems from the centrality of the human being as its founder, subject and primary concern. Human interests, ideals and values and the perfection of human personality are fundamental to the Buddha's dual approach of ensuring happiness and well-being for the human being both here in this world and hereafter. The Buddha's teachings provide practical guidelines to refashion one's life on one's own initiative and at one's own pace. He has categorically discouraged metaphysical and philosophical speculation and argumentation and advocated pragmatism. Thus all elements highlighted in the above definitions of humanism, including the system of thought expounded by Schiller and William James, are *prima facie* applicable to the examination of the subject of this paper.

## b. Early Buddhism

By *Early Buddhism* is meant the teachings of the Buddha and his immediate disciples as can be traced from the available literature. From circa 528 to 483 BCE (according to the widely accepted chronology), the Buddha as a wandering teacher carried on an extensive mission in and around Magadha (= more or less the State of Bihar in modern India). He entered into dialogue and debate with many people on a wide variety of subjects and, on occasion, delivered on his own initiative well structured discourses on various aspects of his Path of Deliverance.

The establishment of the Sangha as a self-regulating and self-renewing monastic organization created an effective mechanism for the compilation and transmission of his teachings. The underlying credo of Buddhism as it evolved into a religion centered round the trinity comprising the Buddha the founder, Dhamma his teachings and the Sangha his disciples. Elevated to the rank of Three Refuges, this Trinity came to be called Triple Gem or Three Treasures.

Inherent in this development was the commitment of the Sangha to preserve the integrity and the authenticity of the Dhamma, which after the Buddha's death represented the Buddha himself as a permanent teacher. It is in the earliest compilations of the Dhamma, as in the Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas of the Pali Canon and

corresponding works of the Āgama Sūtras of the Buddhist Canon in Chinese as well as fragments of the now lost Sanskrit Canon that we look for traces of *Early Buddhism*.

A rule-of-thumb criterion in assessing the authenticity and the antiquity of these sources is threefold:

1. The Buddha is presented as a human being with only a minimum of faith-evoking embellishments such as miraculous, supernatural or divine trappings;
2. His interlocutors are themselves human and express human concerns and interests while they meet the Buddha in situations which are normal and plausible; and
3. The moral perfection and ultimate liberation of the human being is the fundamental purpose of the teachings and yet matters of a secular nature like interpersonal relations, gender issues, economic and social considerations are extensively dealt with.

As the title of this paper seeks to suggest, *Theravāda tradition* is distinguished from *Early Buddhism* and this calls for an explanation.

### 3. What exactly is Theravāda Tradition?

#### a. Early usage of the term *Theravāda*

The earliest occurrence of the term *theravada* in the Pali Canon is in the Ariyapariyesanasutta of Majjhimanikāya (M. 26) with reference to the doctrines which the ascetic Siddhārtha studied under Ājāra-Kālāma and Uddaka-Rāmaputta. A cliché, purporting to be a comment of the Buddha-to-be on his erstwhile teachers, is translated by I. B. Horner as “I, as far as mere lip service, mere repetition were concerned, spoke the doctrine of knowledge (*nānavāda*) and the doctrine of the elders (*theravāda*),<sup>2</sup> and claimed – I as well as others – that ‘I know, I see.’” On the basis of the Commentary, Horner interprets the expression to be “a profession of strength.” (Mt. I, 208). What is more likely, however, is that, in the contemporary systems of spiritual training, two distinct aspects were noted: namely, the doctrines as known (i.e. the teachings *per se* of the founder or exponent) and their compilation or interpretation by elders or long-standing members. And Ascetic Siddhartha had mastered both aspects. The first point to be noted is that the term itself was pre-Buddhistic and was not invented by the Buddha or his disciples.

It is in the latter sense of compilation and/or interpretation by elders of the system that we meet the word *theriya* in the Pali Chronicles of Sri Lanka in relation to the Buddha’s teachings. (e.g. Dipavaṃsa –circa fourth century CE – IV, 6, 13 and Mahāvaṃsa –circa sixth century CE – III, 40; V, 1). The first recital of the Doctrine and Discipline done at Rajagaha within three months of the Buddha’s death is called *Therīya* because it was done by the theras or elders (*therehe’va katanattā ca theriyā’yam paramparā* – because it was done by the theras themselves, it is the tradition of the theras). The record of the First Council in the Pali Canon, however, adopts a more neutral epithet for this recital: namely, “That of the Five Hundred” because there were five hundred participants in the Council. (Cullavagga XI, 16. 1).

The term *Theravāda* when it occurs in Mahāvamsa V, 6 and 10 is already the generic name of twelve sects, schools or traditions which was contrasted with *Ācariyavāda* – doctrines or traditions of teachers. Assumed in the distinction is that *Theravada* was the orthodoxy while the *Ācariyavādas* were not so. The historicity of the schism in the Buddhist Sangha after the Second Council is undisputed. Both Pali and Sanskrit sources agree, even though they differ in details, that the originally united Sangha split into two main sects or schools as Theras (in Pali) or Sthaviras (in Sanskrit) and Mahāsaṅghikas and that they continued to evolve into as many as eighteen sects. (Cf. Nikāyāvalambanaśāstra by Vaśumitra –circa second century CE).

#### b. Diversity of Sri Lankan Buddhism

It was one of the sects or schools of Theravāda/Sthaviravāda, known as Vibhajjavāda or Analytical Tradition, that Mahinda and Saṅghamittā, son and daughter of Emperor Asoka, established in Sri Lanka in circa 247 BCE. It held sway for over two centuries with the Mahāvihāra, the Great Monastery, as its bastion. The establishment of the Abhayagiri monastery in the first century BCE and the Jetavanārāma in the fourth century CE paved the way for the sectarian developments of the mainland to have their impact in Sri Lanka.

While the Mahāvihāra remained conservative and held on to the Pali Canon, the Abhayagiri and Jetavanārāma monasteries adopted Sanskrit and the new doctrines of Mahāyāna schools. In due course, they were respectively identified with the Dharmarucika and Sāgaliya schools. Fa-Xian in circa 412 CE found five thousand monks in Abhayagiri while Theravadins in the Mahāvihāra were three thousand.

That the Mahāyāna tradition had at least a millennium of widespread presence in Sri Lanka is amply borne out by impressive monuments, inscriptions in Sanskrit with indisputably Mahāyāna content, images of Buddhas, Bodhisatvas and Tārās, and literature. Among the most widely admired works of Buddhist art from Sri Lanka are the gilt bronze Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara of Galewela and colossal monolithic Bodhisatva image of Dambegoda. The text of Prajñāpāramitāsūtra in Sanskrit inscribed in the Sinhala script on seven gold sheets was discovered when the site of Jetavanārāma was excavated. Verses in Sanskrit in praise of the three bodies or Kāyas of the Buddha occur in a rock inscription at Mihintale, the cradle of Buddhism of the Island. (EZ IV, 243). At Tiriyay on the north-eastern coast is another Sanskrit inscription with eleven verses. (Ibid. 314) A form of Bodhisatva cult was associated with kingship. King Siri Saṅghabodhi (300 – 302 CE) is often called a Bodhisatva and an inscription of King Mahinda IV (956-972 CE) states that “none but a Bodhisatva would become a king of Lanka.” (EZ I, 234) Literary sources record that Dharmaruci, Sāgalika and Vaitulyavādi sects flourished alongside the Theravāda tradition of the Mahāvihāra right up to the middle of the twelfth century. (Rahula, 1956, 62-111)

#### c. Unification of Schools or Sects of Buddhism in the Twelfth Century

Parākramabāhu I (1153 – 1186) launched the reunification of the three fraternities of Mahāvihāra, Abhayagiri and Jetavanārāma. The royal authority prevailed and the reunification of the Sangha into one organization resulted in reform

measures with far-reaching results. (Liyanagamage 1968) The most important among them is the precedence given to the Pali Canon and its traditional commentaries and sub-commentaries. Sanskrit was replaced by Pali as the language of worship throughout the country. Consequently, the Mahāyānasūtras, which were upheld by the other two monasteries up to this time, went into disuse and virtually disappeared leaving traces of their influence specially in the religious works in Sinhala written by a number of lay scholars in the thirteenth century.

The loss of the Mahāyāna scriptures was more than compensated by the adoption and popularization of rites and ritual, including mantra or dharani and maṇḍala or yantra from the Mahāyāna. The concept of the Buddha too underwent a change. Supernatural or even divine attributes came to be associated with him. While writers of the earlier period had no problem in referring to the Buddha simply as *Budun* in Sinhala, later writers would humbly address only the “shadow of the footwear of King Buddha” (*Budu-rajānan-vahan-se*). Devotional worship gained in popularity. Repeating the formula *Namo Buddhāya* or the nine or ten qualities of the Buddha in the litany “*Iti’pi so bhagavā arahan sammāsambuddho etc.*”<sup>3</sup> was prescribed as an antidote for fear and insecurity.

The Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara figured as God Natha to be worshipped and prayed to in Buddhist temples. Possibly, Samantabhadra similarly became the Buddhist deity Saman. Maitreya, the Bodhisatva who is believed to become the next Buddha, assumed a special position in that the popularly expressed wish after a good deed is to go through the cycle of life and death with all happiness and luxury in both human and heavenly existences and to be reborn at the time of Buddha Maitreya to be instructed and liberated by him. The most fervent way of expressing gratitude is to wish that the doer of the good act be born a Buddha. As regards one’s ultimate liberation, the availability of several paths was recognized and the oft-repeated wish was to enter Nibbāna through any one of the three modes of enlightenment (*Tuntara bodhiyen ektara bodhiyakin* – from one form of enlightenment out of the three forms – namely, as Buddha, Paccekabuddha or Arahant).

Hence what developed thus since the twelfth century Sri Lanka was an amalgam of Buddhist traditions which seemed to satisfy diverse spiritual and religious needs of the people. Not only did it take root in Sri Lanka but was eagerly adopted by Myanmar and Thailand and consequently Cambodia and Laos: monks from these countries came to receive higher ordination and education in Sri Lanka: and Sri Lankan missionary monks took the new form of Buddhism to the royal courts of these countries. The Theravāda Pali Canon along with the exceedingly meticulous exegetical commentaries and sub-commentaries and the other literary works in Pali provided an intellectual base for the popular elements which came from the Mahāyāna.

It was, nevertheless, a far cry from the Theravāda of the pre-Christian era in both India and Sri Lanka and also from what the Mahāvihāra maintained as its orthodoxy right up to the time of Parākramabāhu I. As the fountain of inspiration and seat of authority for reformed Buddhism, Sri Lanka became the religious metropolis of South and Southeast Asia.

d. "Protestant Buddhism" of the Twentieth Century

There is a further element which has to be taken into consideration in defining the "Theravada" Tradition of modern times. Buddhism in Sri Lanka degenerated rapidly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a result of the occupation of its maritime region by the Portuguese and the Dutch and their frequent incursions into the central hills. As in all instances of such degeneration, the first to be undermined was the intellectual base of Buddhism and consequently animistic and ritualistic elements entered the belief system of the people, as exemplified by astrology, devil dancing, and magic. A revival in which a team of monks from Thailand played a key role revamped the Buddhist Sangha in 1753. A remarkable cultural and literary renaissance ensued. The increasing interest on the part of Western scholars in literary and archaeological research gave a further fillip to the popularization of Buddhism.<sup>4</sup>

The collaboration of the Sangha with these foreign scholars, on the one hand, and the attraction of activists of the caliber of Colonel Henry Steel Olcott of USA, on the other, brought about an unprecedented renaissance of Buddhism. Lay involvement in the study and propagation of Buddhism went hand in hand with the establishment of Buddhist schools and institutions for social services. The net result of the growth and incessant activity in Buddhist circles of Sri Lanka of this period was the emergence of a form of practical and people-oriented Buddhism which scholars like Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere called "Protestant Buddhism."<sup>5</sup> Modernizing impact of Western science and technology as well as of Christian institutions and practices resulted in highlighting those aspects of the wide-ranging teachings of the Buddha, which appealed to modern times. (Gombrich 1988/94, 172-179)

In this process of re-interpreting Buddhism as a religion in conformity with new sociopolitical and scientific tendencies, stress was laid on the humanistic elements of Early Buddhism as are contained in the Pali Canon and its commentaries. The principal players were scholar-monks like Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala, Waskaduwe Sri Subhuti and Weligama Sri Sumangala and lay activists like Olcott and his Sri Lankan proteges, Anagarika Dharmapala and Sir Don Baron Jayatilaka. (Guruge 1999-2) As a result Sri Lanka resumed its historic role as a center for the propagation of another new form of Buddhism from the last decade of the nineteenth century. None of these scholars or activists, however, used the term Theravāda to describe the form of Buddhism which they had begun to propagate.

When students of comparative religion needed to distinguish this form of Buddhism from what prevailed mainly in China, Korea and Japan, the term **Theravāda** was found to be the most convenient. But is that an accurate description? Do its users recognize that the form of Buddhism for which it was applied in the pre-Christian era had long ceased to exist other than in books? What prevails in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Vietnam is better and more precisely described by the neutral geographical expression "Southern School of Buddhism." But the early scholars who either ignored or were ignorant of the historical development of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia equated the Southern School of Buddhism to Theravāda. They even speak in terms of "compassion-based, altruistic Mahāyāna – the Big Raft" and "wisdom-oriented, self-

centered or selfish Theravāda – the Small Raft,” and sought to perpetuate the pejorative term used in Mahāyāna literature by treating the term Hīnayāna to be synonymous with Theravāda.<sup>6</sup>

#### e. Hallmarks of Theravada Tradition

Perhaps there is no particular objection to calling the Southern School of Buddhism *Theravāda* as long one realizes that it has to be historically dissociated from the schools of that description on account of the developments in the twelfth, the nineteenth and the twentieth century Sri Lanka. But it does not appear to be the case. In three of the current Buddhist dictionaries, Theravāda is defined as follows:

Theravāda is the only one of the old schools of Buddhism that has survived among those which Mahāyānists have called ‘Hīnayāna.’ It is sometimes called Southern Buddhism or Pali Buddhism. It is found today in Ceylon, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Chittagong (East Bengal) – Nyanatiloka: Buddhist Dictionary 1952.

Until recently this school was known in the West by its generic name of Hīnayāna, which means small or lesser vehicle (of salvation), but this term of reproach coined by the Mahāyānists, has now been dropped in favor of the more accurate and less discourteous name of *Theravāda*, the Way of the Elders. As the Theravāda school covers Ceylon, Burma, Siam and Cambodia it is called Southern School, to distinguish it from the Northern or Mahāyāna School which covers Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea and Japan. – Christmas Humphreys: A Popular Dictionary of Buddhism 1962

Theravāda fut introduit á Ceylan (actuelle Sri Lanka) par le fils du roi Asoka, Mahendra (pali Mahinda) ou il fut connu sous le nom de bouddhisme du Sud ou il subsiste – Dictionnaire du Bouddhisme: Termes et Concepts (Editions du Rocher) 1983

Richard Gombrich is far more accurate when he justifies the current popular usage of the term Theravāda on the following ground:

“Hallmarks of Theravāda Buddhism are the use of Pali as its main sacred language and dependence on the Pali version of the Buddhist Canon as its sacred scripture.” (1988/94, 3)

This description of Theravada recalls I-Tsing’s (Yijing’s) statement in the eighth century CE

“If one worships Bodhisattvas and reads Mahāyāna scriptures, he will be called a Mahāyānist, otherwise [one is] called a Hīnayānist” (quoted by Bangwei Wang in Guruge 1992, 69)

This is why a distinction is maintained in this paper between Early Buddhism and the “Theravāda Tradition” of our times.

#### 4. The Buddha the Man

##### a. Autobiographical Snippets

The Pali Canon contains a few but significant autobiographical references attributed to the Buddha. <sup>7</sup> He has spoken of the luxury in which he was brought up in his father's home.

"I was delicate, most delicate, supremely delicate. Lily ponds were made for me at my father's house solely for my benefit.... I used no sandalwood that was not from Benares. My turban, tunic, lower garments and cloak were all made of Benares cloth. A white parasol was held over me day and night so that no cold or heat or dust or grit or dew might inconvenience me."

He has mentioned that three palaces were constructed for him - one for each season. He has referred to his life style by referring to the way the servants were treated:

"Though meals of broken rice with lentil soup are given to servants and retainers in other people's houses, in my father's house white rice and meat were given to them."

He proceeded further,

"While I had such power and good fortune, ... the vanity of youth, ... the vanity of health, ... the vanity of life entirely left me.: (A III,38)

Elsewhere he referred to his youth again and said,

"Being subject to birth, aging, ailment, death, sorrow and defilement, I sought after what was also subject to these things" (M. 26).

"Later, while still young, in the first phase of life, I shaved off my hair and beard - though my mother and father wished otherwise and grieved with tearful faces -, and I put on yellow cloth and went forth from house life to homelessness. (M. 26, 36, 85, 100)

In these same texts the Buddha has given his experience with the two teachers, Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta:

"I soon learned the teaching. I claimed that as far as lip reciting and rehearsal of [their] teaching went I could speak with knowledge (*ñānavāda*) and assurance (*theravāda*), and that I knew and saw - and there were others who did likewise." (Ibid)<sup>8</sup>

The brief account of his life in the forest as an ascetic underlines the fear and dread he felt as any ordinary person:

"On such specially holy nights ... I dwelt in some awesome abodes as orchard shrines, woodland shrines and tree shrines which make the hair stand up. And while I dwelt there, a deer would approach me or a peacock would knock off a branch or wind would rustle the leaves. Then I thought: Surely this is the fear and dread coming." (M. 4)

He also has described how strenuous practices affected him physically:

"I stopped in-breaths and out-breaths in my mouth. When I did so, there was a loud sound of winds coming from my ear-holes. ...I stopped the in-breaths and out-breaths in my mouth, nose and ears. When I did so, violent winds racked my head, ... there were violent pains in my head, ... violent winds carved up my belly, and ... there was violent burning in my belly." (M. 36, 85, 100)

The same texts attribute to him an account of how the stringent fasting affected his body:

"My body reached a state of extreme emaciation; my limbs became like joint segments of vine or bamboo stems, because of eating so little. My back became like a camel's hoof; the projections of my spine stood forth like corded beads; my ribs jutted out as gaunt as crazy rafters of an old roofless barn; the gleam of my eyes sunk far

down in their sockets looked like the gleam of water sunk far down in a deep well; my scalp shriveled and withered as a green gourd shrivels and withers in the wind and sun. If I touched my belly skin, I encountered my backbone; if I touched my backbone, I encountered my belly skin, for my belly skin cleaved to my backbone. If I made water or evacuated my bowels, I fell over on my face there. If I tried to ease my body by rubbing my limbs with my hands, the hair, rotted at the roots, fell away from my body as I rubbed, because of eating so little. (M. 36, 85, 100)<sup>9</sup>

The all too natural inclination to abandon his goal figures in a beautiful poem where the Buddha's sentiments are attributed to Māra the Tempter (Guruge 1993-1, 169):

O you are thin and pale,  
And you are in the death's presence too.  
A thousand parts are pledged to death,  
But life still holds one part of you.  
Live, sir! Life is the better way;  
You can gain merit if you live;  
Come live the holy life and pour  
Libations on the holy fires,  
And thus a world of merit gain.  
What can you do by struggling now?  
The path of struggling too is rough  
And difficult and hard to bear." (Sn. III, 2)

What came to his mind at this stage is stated as follows:

"But by this grueling penance, I have attained no distinction higher than the human state<sup>10</sup>. ... Might there be another way to enlightenment?"

Here is recalled an incident from his childhood:

"I thought of a time when my Sakyan father was working and I was sitting in the cool shade of a rose-apple tree ... and entered upon and abode in the First Meditation. .. Then following that memory there came the recognition that it was the way to enlightenment." (M. 36, 85, 100).

The attainment of enlightenment is further described in his own words. (M. 36, S. XII 65, D. 14). It ends with the explanation:

"As long as I did not know by direct knowledge, as it actually is, so long did I make no claim to have discovered the enlightenment. But as soon as I knew by direct knowledge, as it actually is ..... then I claimed to have discovered the enlightenment that is supreme in the world with its deities, its Māras and its divinities, in this generation with its monks and Brahmins, with its princes and men." (S. XXII, 26; Mv. I; S. LVI 11)

It is only here that a reference is made to Māras, divinities and such other supernatural beings. But they are mentioned along with monks and Brahmins and princes and men to describe the world or rather the universe in which enlightenment was supreme.

Two more autobiographical statements occur in the Mahāparinibbāṇasutta. (D.

16) One is on his renunciation and mission:

But twenty-nine I was when I renounced  
The world, Subhadda, seeking after Good.  
For fifty years and one year more, Subhadda,  
Since I went out, a pilgrim have I been  
Through the wide realm of System and of Dhamma –  
Outside of that no victory can be won.

The other in a touching tone is on his imminent death:

“I, too, O Ananda, am now grown old and full of years, my journey is drawing to its close, I have reached my sum of days, I am turning eighty years of age; as just as a worn-out cart, Ananda, can be kept going only with thongs, so, methinks, the body of the Buddha can only be kept going by bandaging it.”

Another equally moving was the statement in agreement with Ānanda:

“So it is, Ānanda, so it is. Youth has to age, health has to sicken, life has to die. All my limbs are flaccid and wrinkled, my body is bent forward, and there seems a change in the sense faculties of my eyes, ears, nose, tongue and bodily sensations.

Shame on you, sordid Age,

Maker of Ugliness.

Age has now trampled down

The form that once had grace.

To live a hundred years

Is not to cheat Decay,

That gives quarter to none

And tramples down all things.” (S. XLVIII, 41)

Ānanda once observed, “He was injured when a splintered rock hit his foot.” (S. IV, 13) When Vakkali in an exceedingly poor state of health excused himself for not visiting the Buddha, the Buddha’s reply was “Enough, Vakkali, why do you want to see my filthy body (*pūṭikāya*)?” (S. XXII, 87) When his struggle with stringent penance and fasting failed, he had no “distinction higher than the human state.” What is significant in all these autobiographical statements is that the Buddha appears, speaks and acts as a human being - a mortal with emotions of fear and anxiety, and subject to human conditions. He was subject to illness and old age. (D. 16; S. XLVII,9) He expected to be so weak in his old age that he would have to be carried about in a gurney. (M. 104)

#### b. Man (*Purisa*) to Superman (*Mahāpurisa*) to Supra-mundane (*Lokottara*) Being

In the earliest texts of the Pali Canon, this was how the Buddha was viewed by his disciples. He was a person of human dimensions: only four finger-breadths taller than his half-brother, Nanda. (Sv. Pac. 92). Both Nanda and Mahākassapa are believed to have resembled the Buddha and sometimes confused disciples who mistook them for the Buddha. In the same Vinaya text, the dimensions of the Buddha’s robe is given as nine spans by six spans (= approximately 9 feet by 6 feet, according to Welivitiye Sorata: Sri Sumangala Sinhala Dictionary sv. *viyata*). And the Buddha and Mahakassapa are said to have exchanged their robes.

The thirty-two characteristics and eighty secondary characteristics of a great man, which the Buddha is said to have possessed, were believed to be common to both a Buddha and a Cakkavatti (Wheel-wielding or universal monarch) and that was according to the Brahmanical lore. How the thirty-two marks of a great man (= Superman in translations of T. W. Rhys Davids) entered the Buddhist lore is to be seen in the Lakkhaṇasutta of the Dighanikāya. The manner in which these marks would affect the life of a universal monarch and that of a Buddha is compared and contrasted, highlighting, of course, the moral and spiritual attributes of a Buddha. (D. 30)

A long list of personality characters occurs in the *Brahmāyusutta* (M. 91) and is said to be the result of a seven-month meticulous scrutiny of the Buddha by Brahmayu's disciple, Uttara. It deals mainly with behavioral aspects as moving about, receiving and partaking of food, washing hands and begging bowl, speaking, preaching etc. The conclusion drawn is that the Buddha was a great man as believed by Brahmins according to their own scriptures. Apart from a few dubious characteristics (i.e. soles with illustrations, webbed hands, arms reaching the knees, genitals hidden in a sheath and a tongue large enough to cover the forehead), all that had been observed relate to a handsome and well-proportioned man who does everything mindfully in a coordinated manner. Others made similar observations. Saccaka, the Jaina, chided the Buddha for having taken a nap just one hot afternoon after his meals. (M. 36) When asked by members of other sects, Anuradha described the Buddha as "the highest of men and supremest of men, attained to supreme attainment." (S. XLIV, 2)

The charisma of the Buddha induced people to ask who he really was. *Anguttaranikaya* records a conversation with Brahman Doṇa:

Sir, will you be a god (*deva*)?

No, Brahman.

Will you be a heavenly angel (*gandhabba*)?

No, Brahman.

Will you be a spirit (*yakkha*)?

No, Brahman.

Will you be a human being (*manussa*)?

No, Brahman.

Then, Sir, What indeed will you be?

Brahman, the taints by which I might be a *deva*, *gandhabba*, *yakkha* or *manussa* have been all abandoned in me, cut off at the root, made like a palm stump, done away with, and are no more subject to arising in the future. Just as a blue or red or white lotus is born in water, grows in water and stands up above the water untouched by it, so too I, who was born in this world and grew in the world, have transcended the world, and I live untouched by the world. Remember me as one who is enlightened. (*Buddho'ti maṃ Brāhmaṇa dhārehi*) (A. IV, 36).

The reason advanced for not being any one other than a Buddha is purely ethical. This as well as numerous other references in the Pali Canon would show that, during the lifetime of the Buddha himself, **Buddhahood** had become a distinct state, *above* and *different* from that of a human being. Thus was set in motion the progressive addition of supernatural, supernormal or supra-mundane attributes to the Buddha.

In Early Buddhism, itself, the Buddha is seen emerging from the purely human state reflected in the autobiographical snippets, and assuming that of a great man or Superman with miracles associated with his life and miraculous powers "higher than the human state" (*uttari-manussa-dhamma*) (D. 11) The final product of this development in Early Buddhism is to be found in *Acchariyabbhutadhammasutta* of *Majjhimanikāya* (M. 123) and in two of the injunctions in *Mahāparinibbāṇasutta* of *Dighanikāya*. (D. 16)

Acchariyabbhutadhammasutta most interestingly is attributed to Ānanda, who punctuates almost every paragraph with the statement, "Face to face have I heard this from the Buddha and face to face have I received" (*sammukhā me taṃ, bhante, Bhagavato sutam sammukhā patiggahitam*). What needed such repeated reassurance from the narrator was an account of the birth of the Buddha-to-be, which was replete with "wondrous and marvelous phenomena" (*acchariyā abbhutadhammā*). The narrative begins with the Buddha's immediately previous life in the Tusita heaven and his decision to descend to earth to become the Buddha. Earthquakes and sudden illumination through out the universe mark this event. From the time of the conception, the mother observes the five precepts. She is able to see the unborn baby within her womb "with all his limbs and complete sense organs." She carries him exactly for ten months and delivers him standing. When the baby exits from the mother's womb (*mātukucchismā nikkhamati* – N.B. naturally and not from the right side as later narrators added and artists illustrated), he was clean as a gem with no blood or mucus and was received in their hands by four gods. Two sprays of hot and cold water from above, however, wash the mother and the baby. The moment he is born, he stands on his feet, surveys the directions, takes seven steps to the north (N.B. not on lotus flowers) and in a lordly voice says, "I am the chief of the world. I am the best in the world. I am the first in the world. This is my last birth. There is now no existence again." The paradigm for this account is to be found in Mahāpadānasutta of the Dighanikāya (d. 14), where the birth of the previous Buddha Vipassi is described and in a concluding section a resume of the Buddha Gotama is added as a direct quote from gods in a heaven.<sup>11</sup>

With these discourses begins the composition of legendary accounts of the Buddha's life to which faith-evoking elements came to be added progressively. These proliferated as one of the schools of Buddhism concentrated on the representation of the Buddha in Lokottara or supra-mundane form and details. More and more miraculous elements were introduced until the result was a *vita sanctorum*. In such later works as Mahāvastu, Lalitavistara and Abhiniṣkramaṇasūtra (extant only in Chinese translation), the Buddha has transcended his human standing and become *devātideva* (a god excelling gods) and *brahmātibrahma* (a Brahma excelling Brahmas). It was a Buddha of such a character that St. Clement of Alexandria, Egypt, knew in the third century CE. He spoke of "Indians that obey the precepts of Boudda, who, through exaggeration of his dignity, honor as God."

The two injunctions in D. 16 reflect the sanctity attached to the Buddha while he was still alive:

1. The Buddha's body was to be cremated and the remains treated as holy relics to be enshrined in cetiyas (mounds or pagodas) and worshipped; and
2. The places connected with his birth, enlightenment, first sermon and death were to be shrines visited by pilgrims.

Unrecorded as an injunction but equally indicative of the sanctity attached to the Buddha was the Early Buddhists' self-imposed prohibition of representing the Buddha in art in human form over almost the first five hundred years of Buddhism.

By the time historical evidence on the spread and development of Buddhism becomes available around the time of Asoka the Mauryan Emperor (circa 299-

228BCE), the prevalence of relic-worship and pilgrimage is amply substantiated. Asoka himself has recorded in his edicts his pilgrimage to Lumbini and Buddha Gaya. (Guruge 1993-1)<sup>12</sup> The Buddhist sculpture of the next two centuries at Bharhut, Sanchi and Amaravati abounds in aniconic representation of the Buddha. Wherever his presence was indispensable to the event depicted in a panel were used such symbols as foot-print, seat, bodhi-tree, wheel, parasol and column of fire.

The adoption of Mahāyāna Buddhism by the foreign dynasty of Kushans led to the representation of the Buddha in human form, with Greco-Roman gods serving as the model. Within Mahāyāna, the proliferation of Buddhas, on the one hand, and the assumption of supremacy of Primeval (ādi) and Meditational (dhyāni) Buddhas over Sākyamuni, on the other, changed the perception of the Buddha as a human teacher. This was visibly reflected in art where the Buddha was progressively made bigger than life – a case of spiritual and moral greatness being represented by physical dimensions. Among the murals of Ajanṭha<sup>13</sup> is an example of this development: it is an enormous Buddha who meets his erstwhile wife, who with her son is portrayed as midgets in comparison.

The impetus to build or construct gigantic Buddha statues came from Mahāyāna Buddhism. It is in the traditionally Mahāyāna countries that the largest number of colossal Buddhas are found. In Sri Lanka, where Mahāyāna and Early Buddhism of the Theravāda type coexisted, the monumental statues appear to be invariably connected with Mahāyāna institutions: e.g. Buduruvagala (51 feet), Maligawila (34 feet), Polonnaruwa Galvihara (50 and 23 feet) and possibly also Aukana and Sasseruwa (39 feet) and Dowe (13 feet).

We shall review the changing perception of the personality of the Buddha when we return to the consideration of how the Buddha is perceived today in “Theravāda” Tradition.

## 5. Human Concerns in the Teachings of the Buddha

### a. Perfection of Human Personality

What the Buddha taught was a Path of Deliverance from suffering, specifically called in the first sermon itself “the Noble Eightfold Path leading to the Cessation of Suffering” (*dukkha-nirodha-gāmini-paṭipadā, ariyaṭṭhangika-magga*). The major part of the Pali Canon, therefore, consists of detailed examination and exploration of the process of ethical purification through virtuous conduct (*sīla*), development and concentration of the mind (*samādhi*) and realization of wisdom (*paññā*).

The Buddha’s discourses on this subject are addressed to human beings, who, alone are believed to possess the relevant background and capacity to seek deliverance. It has been specifically stated that the Buddhahood was attainable only by a human being. Though other spirits are mentioned as acquiring various stages in the Path as Stream-enterers, Once-Returners and Non-Returners, only humans figure in the Pali Canon as reaching the ultimate state of an Arhant. All of them were not monks or nuns.

For example, the Buddha's own father is said to have become an Arhant as a lay person. So the teachings of the Buddha qualify as a form of humanism as they are concerned with perfection of human personality. But there is, of course, a major difference. The Buddha points out a way to happiness not only in this life in the world but in both here and hereafter in one or more lives to come. "One rejoices here and having passed away one rejoices. The doer of good rejoices in both" (*Idha nandati pecca nandati – puññakārī ubhayattha nandati*) is the reward that one gets for being good.

### b. Monastics and Laity

It is true that the soteriological approach of the Buddha places a high premium on the monastic ideal of renunciation and homelessness. In an autobiographical statement on why he renounced lay life, the Buddha says,

Full of obstacles is life in a house  
It is an abode of stain (or dust)  
Free as space is Going Forth  
Seeing this I went forth (Sn. III, 1)

A significant number of discourses culminate in describing how a person listens to a sermon, discovers the obstacles in lay life to practice the holy path, renounces all that is worldly and takes to the life of few needs of a monk or a nun, which progressively enables him or her to attain deliverance. (D. 1, 2; M. 27, 38, 51, 60, 76; A. IV, 198; X, 99. Cf. Guruge 1999-1, 37-38) A substantial discourse preached to King Ajātasattu deals with the benefits of monasticism, commencing with this-worldly advantages and culminating in the realization of Nibbāṇa (*Sāmaññaphalasutta*, D. 2).

In a verse in *Itivuttaka*, the Buddha lays emphasis on the mutually dependent roles of the monastics and the laity for the development of the Faith:

The lay and the homeless alike  
Each supporting the other  
Accomplish the true doctrine  
The peerless refuge from Bondage (It. 107)

An explanation given by Ānanda and Sariputta to Anāthapiṇḍaka, the most generous lay supporter of the Buddha, gives the impression that the Buddha and his disciples differentiated the subject-matter when they preached to monastics and lay persons: "Such talks on the Dhamma are not given to the white-clothed laity: they are given to those gone forth from the house life" (M. 143)

### c. Teachings for the laity

The humanistic concerns of the Buddha predominate in the numerous discourses addressed to the lay folk on matters of socioeconomic and ethical significance to their life.

**Equality of humanity** was a matter of primary concern to him. He was disturbed by the division of society into caste and impatient with Brahmans who claimed social supremacy on grounds of birth. (D. 3, 4) "Not by birth but by action does one become a revered Brahman or a degraded outcaste" is the crux of his teachings on caste distinctions which the contemporary society upheld. (Cf.

Aggikabhāradvāja- or Vasalasutta – Sn. I, 7 and Vāseṭṭhasutta – Sn. III, 9; verses 620-647) Among the virtues which qualified a person to be called a Brahman irrespective of his birth caste are such human values as

Being without possessions and not seizing any  
Having power of patience to endure insults, ill-treatment and bondage  
Observing religious duties and moral principles  
Avoiding violence  
Not injuring or destroying living beings, movable or immovable  
Not being hostile among the hostile  
Being peaceful among the violent  
Being free from greed, hatred, and pride  
Not depreciating others  
Speaking clearly and truthfully so that none is offended by one's speech and not using harsh language.

On the contrary, one was to be called an outcaste whatever be his birth status if one

Was angry, grumbling, evil and hypocritical  
Failed in vision and was deceitful  
Harmed living beings  
Had no love for the living  
Left unpaid debts saying, "I owe you no debt"  
Waylaid people on the highway to take their belongings  
Lied as a witness for the sake of money  
Seduced or ravished other's wives  
Killed or harassed with words ones' parents or relatives  
Gave wrong counsel with a concealed motive  
Did not return hospitality when an opportunity arose  
Praised one's self and denigrated others  
Degraded others through arrogance.

Not only did he preach but he also counteracted caste prejudices with action. The Sangha was open to all castes, classes, and occupations. Purely chronological seniority from the moment of entry and no other criterion decided precedence within the Sangha. "Just as waters of various rivers lost their identity when they flowed into the ocean, persons of different castes lost their previous social identities in the Sangha," was how the process was explained. Slaves, courtesans, scavengers, barbers and criminals attained distinction within it. (e. g. Uttamā, Ambapālī, Sunita, Sopāka, Upāli, Angulimāla – Cf. Malalasekera: DPPN for details).

The Buddha upheld that **birth as a human being** was a rare and difficult-to-attain privilege (*Kiccho Manussapaṭilābho* – Dp.182. Cf. the more popular saying *Dullabhañ ca manussattaṃ* for which a Canonical reference could not be found) and relied on the capacity of a human being to think critically and independently for one's self. In matters of personal religious belief and practice, he expected every person to exercise **freedom of thought**. In this context, Kālāmasutta of Anguttaranikāya (III, 65) stands out as a remarkable assertion of the human right to think independently without the pressures and constraints of dogma:

Do not accept anything on mere hearsay or tradition, on account of rumors or because it accords with your scriptures, by mere supposition or inference, by merely considering the reasons or because it agrees with your preconceived notions and, therefore, seems acceptable or because the preacher is a respected person.

But when you know for yourselves that these things are moral and blameless: that they are praised by the wise and that when performed or undertaken they are conducive to the well-being and the happiness of the many, then should you accept them and act accordingly.

At the same time, the Buddha anticipated by two millennia and more the principles of **pragmatism** of Schiller and William James and persuaded people to restrict their speculation and quest for knowledge to what was immediately essential and what was knowable. The ten unexplained questions (Poṭṭhapādasutta of Dīghanikāya D. 9, Cullamālunkyaṭṭasutta of Majjhimanikāya M. 63 and Vacchagottasaṃyutta of Saṃyuttanikāya S. XXXIII, 1-55) and the parable of the surgeon and the wounded man (Cullamālunkyasutta M. 63) illustrate this aspect of humanism of the Buddha’s teachings.

The Buddha desisted from making converts, persuading potential disciples to continue supporting their earlier teachers. (Udumbarika-sīhanādasutta – D. 25 and Upāligahapatisutta –M. 56). The **ethical system** he presented to humanity had no place for commandments or *ex cathedra* orders. All deeds one commits volitionally are either skillful and competent (*kusala*) or unskillful and incompetent (*akusala*).

A person took upon himself or herself voluntarily the kinds of discipline which constituted a skillful, competent, smart or wholesome conduct: “**I take upon myself the discipline of abstaining from** (*veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*) killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and stupefying liquor and drugs” was the formula with which one resolved to observe the virtuous life. Good and evil were also defined pragmatically. Evil is what

1. one does not wish others to do unto one’s self;
2. one repents after committing
3. a wise person criticizes in another; and
4. does not contribute to the good and the happiness of the many.

Good, likewise, is the opposite of these.

The moral “code” of Early Buddhism as can be culled from many texts in the Pali Canon comprises things to be avoided as well as done. Two main lists of things to do appear as the **Four Sublime States** (*Brahmavihāra*) and **Ten Meritorious Deeds** (*Puñña-kiriya-vatthu*).

The Sublime States to practice and abide by are  
Loving kindness (*Mettā*) – a sentiment similar to a mother’s love for her only child;  
Compassion (*Karuṇā*) – what makes one rush to relieve another’s misery;  
Sympathetic Joy (*Muditā*) – rejoicing in other’s joy; and  
Equanimity/Equality (*Upekkhā*) – treating all alike.

These are to be extended to all sentient beings in a limitless universe. Karaṇīyamettasutta of Suttanipāta (Sn. I, 8) – the most frequently preached and chanted discourse of the Pali Canon on **loving kindness** - elaborates the universality of beings to be so covered with one’s sentiments of loving kindness in a way that the born and the still-to-be born, the seen, the unseen as tiny as an atom, and those nearby and far away are all included. Mettānisamsasutta lists eleven benefits accruing to a person who practices loving kindness and the humanistic base of this list is another

example of the Buddha's pragmatism: i. Sleeps happily; ii. Awakes happily; iii. Does not have nightmares; iv. Is liked by humans; v. Is liked by non-humans; vi. Gods protect him/her; vii. Fire, poison or weapons do not hurt him/her; viii. Mind reaches concentration quickly; ix. Complexion of the face clears up; x. Dies in consciousness; and xi. Gets reborn in a Brahma-heaven if no higher plain had been reached. ( A. V, 342)

Meritorious deeds to be performed are i. Charity or generous giving; ii. Virtuous life; iii. Development of the mind through meditation iv. Reverence to those worthy of reverence; v. Service to the elderly, the needy, the sick and society at large; vi. Transference of one's merits to others; vii. Rejoicing in merits acquired by others; viii. Expounding or teaching the Dhamma; ix. Listening to the Dhamma; and x. Straightening or rectifying one's views.

Things to be avoided are listed similarly. As occurring through deed, word and thought are listed **ten unskillful, unwholesome or incompetent actions** (*Dasakusala-vatthu*): killing, stealing and sexual misconduct from deeds; lying, foul language, slandering and vain talk from words; and greed, malice and wrong views from thoughts. The humanistic foundation of the Buddha's thinking is best exemplified by his definition of wrong thoughts: right views are so universally spelled out that there is not even the slightest trace of bigotry. (Guruge 1999-1, 89-90)

Presented in various contexts are **negative qualities** to be progressively eliminated. When they are grouped together the following are the human failings – more precisely, the defilements of the mind - whose eradication was the objective of the ethical teachings of the Buddha: i. Covetousness, excessive greed; ii. Malice, ill-will; iii. Delusion, ignorance; iv. Anger; v. hostility, hatred; vi. Contempt, denigration; vii. Presumption, domineering; viii. Envy; ix. Jealousy, avarice, selfishness; x. deceit, hypocrisy; xi. Fraud; xii. Obstinacy; xiii. Impetuosity, quarrelsomeness, rivalry; xiv. Conceit; xv. Haughtiness, superiority complex; xvi. Vanity, pride; xvii. Negligence, heedlessness. (cf. Ibid, 91) "When the mind is clean, a good future must be expected," says the Buddha in the *Vatthūpamasutta* (M. 7)

The pithy aphoristic statements of *Dhammapada*, *Udāna*, *Itivuttaka*, and *Suttanipāta*, and the deftly compiled lists of ones, twos, threes up to elevens in *Anguttanikāya*, and the brief sermons of *Samyuttanikāya* of the Pali Canon deal mostly with matters applicable to lay life in this world:

Hatred ceases with love and not with hatred.

Anger subsides when one stops harboring grievances.

The diligent never die; the negligent are like the dead.

A friend indeed is one who points out one's faults.

A well-tamed mind is one's best friend and an ill-tamed mind the worst enemy.

Good health is the greatest profit; contentment the greatest wealth; and trustworthy persons the best relatives.

They blame those who speak a lot; they blame those who speak a little; and they even blame the silent; there is none who is not blamed in this world.

This is only a meager sample from *Dhammapada* alone. In *Udāna* occurs the parable of the elephant and the blind men which illustrates the importance of a holistic view of things. (U. IV, 4)

Again as illustrative of the Buddha’s humanistic approach is the Mangalasutta (Sn. II, 4) where the objective is to lead a person to a point where he or she is “victorious everywhere” (*sabbattham aparājitā*) to achieve happiness everywhere with a mind unruffled by life’s changing circumstances (*puṭṭhassa lokadhammehi cittaṃ yassa na kampati*). Listed in it are **thirty-eight blessings** and only eight deal with renunciation, asceticism and Path of Deliverance. The other thirty relate to the life of the laity and commence with one’s social and material environment. Not associating with the foolish, associating with the wise and honoring the worthy and residing in a genial locality are the first four blessings. The rest in order are the following:

Possessing merits acquired from the past,  
To set one’s self in the right course,  
Erudition and skill,  
Besides well-groomed discipline,  
And words which are pleasantly spoken.  
To tend one’s parents,  
Caring for wife and children,  
Untangled in occupations,  
Liberality and righteous conduct,  
Cherishing one’s relatives,  
Engaged in blameless action,  
To shun and abstain from evil,  
Restraint in the use of intoxicants,  
Heedful in the practice of virtue,  
Dignity and humility,  
Contentment and gratitude,  
Listening on time to religious discourses,  
Patience and courtesy,  
The company of recluses,  
And religious discussions at opportune moments.

Literally thousands of similar quotations can be culled from the vast body of discourses attributed to the Buddha and his senior disciples in the Pali Canon.

## 6. The Buddha’s Position on Social Issues

### a. Gender Issues

Contrary to the prevailing views on gender issues in India, the Buddha is on record as recognizing the equality of women. To King Pasenadi Kosala who looked unhappy on the birth of a daughter, he had the following advice:

A woman child, O lord of men, may prove  
Even a better offspring than a male.  
For she may grow up wise and virtuous,  
Her husband’s mother reverencing, true wife.  
The boy she may bear may do great deeds,  
And rule great realms, yea, such a son  
Of noble wife becomes his country’s guide. (S. III, 2, 6)

In his list of seven factors which contributed to the security and development of a nation, the fourth was that women and girls should be assured protection from harassment. (D. 16).

When, after repeated refusal by the Buddha to ordain his step-mother, Ānanda asked the specific question, “Are the women folk capable of going forth from home to homelessness in the Dhamma as preached by the Buddha and attaining the status of a Stream-Enterer, Once-Returner, Non-Returner or Arahant?” the answer of the Buddha was a categorical “Yes.” Not only did he say so, but created the Order of Nuns to accommodate women, even though he set additional rules for them. (Cv. X,1) Of course, the first of the eight rules which makes the most senior nun junior to the just ordained monk has not been convincingly explained. Yet the step-mother as a nun was declared the chief of those with the longest experience. (A. I, 25) In a non-Canonical work, Manorathapūraṇī, the spirit of the Buddhist attitude occurs as “Not on all occasions are men wise. Women, too, are wise and intelligent on various occasions.” (*Itthī’pi paṇḍitā honti tattha tattha vicakkhaṇā*) (Vol. I, p.205)

As many as fourteen short discourses on women occur in the Saṃyuttanikāya: one of them lists five desirable qualities of a woman as

- being beautiful
- being wealthy
- being virtuous
- being skillful and diligent (*analo* = not lazy), and
- producing progeny. ( S. XXXVII, 1)

Such a woman is said to be certainly favored by men. Those without these qualities are shown as disliked by men. (S. XXXVII, 2) Another enumerates the miseries particular to women:

- has to leave for her husband’s home very young and be separated from her own relatives,
- menstruation,
- pregnancy,
- childbirth, and
- has to be of service to man (*purisassa paricāriyaṃ upeti*) (S. XXXVII, 3)

Though it is not explicitly stated, the purpose of this discourse could have been to sympathize with the natural lot of women and perhaps draw attention to two socially – inflicted miseries (i. e. the first and the fifth). It is significant that the stereotype role of women as a servant of man is considered a traditional (*āveṇṇika*) misfortune whereas Hindu law-books of a later age made such service a woman’s spiritual duty (Cf. Manu 2, 66-67)

The position of woman as wife and mother finds special mention in the Pali Canon. In several texts the mother is called the *pubbācariyā* or first teacher. Tending father and mother as well as wife and children are viewed as a blessing in the Mangalasutta, quoted above. A monk is not only permitted to share the food obtained by begging with one’s parents but doing so is commended as an act praised by the wise (*paṇḍitā idh’eva naṃ pasaṇsanti*). (Mātuposakasutta, S. VII, 2, 9)

“The wife is one’s best friend” (*bhāriyā ca paramā sakhā*) is a dictum of the Buddha. (S. I, 6, 4) In an insightful analysis of the role and behavior of a wife in a

marriage, he identifies as many as seven different kinds of wives. Three kinds he condemns as harsh and devoid of virtue and love: namely,

torturing wife (*vadhakabhariyā*),  
stealing wife (*coribhariyā*) and  
domineering wife (*ayyabhariyā*).

Four others whom he praises are

mother-wife (*mātubhariyā*), who is protective and tends a husband as a mother does a son,  
sister-wife (*bhaginibhariyā*) who is modest and respectful to the husband,  
friend-wife (*sakhībhariyā*), who is noble and chaste, and rejoices at the sight of the husband, and  
slave-wife (*dāsībhariyā*), who is free from anger and with a pure heart waits on the husband. (A. VII, 59)

**Adultery** (*paradārasevī*: “associating with other’s wives”) is condemned on grounds of not only ethical impropriety but also this-worldly consequences. In two verses of the Dhammapada, he says:

Four misfortunes befall a man who commits adultery: acquisition of demerit, disturbed sleep, humiliation as the third and hell (*niraya*) as the fourth. Acquiring demerit, one has an evil destiny. Frightened man’s happiness with a frightened woman is short lived. The king imposes heavy punishment. Hence no man should frequent another’s wife. (verses 309-310)

We shall return to the Buddha’s knowledge and understanding of a wife’s emotional needs when we discuss interpersonal relationships in Sigālovādasutta.

## b. Poverty and Violence

In Kūṭadantasutta of Dīghanikāya (D. 5), the Buddha makes a direct link between **poverty and violence**, and argues that **law-enforcement and punishment** are not an effective solution:

Perchance his majesty might think, “I will soon put a stop to these scoundrels’ game by degradation and punishment, and fines and imprisonment and execution” But the criminal actions of bandits who pillage villages and towns and make roads unsafe cannot be satisfactorily put a stop to. The criminals left unpunished would still go on harassing the realm. Now there is one method to adopt to put a thorough end to this disorder: to those who keep cattle and cultivate farms, let the king give fodder and seed-corn. To those who trade, let the king give capital. To those in government service, let the king give wages and food. Then these people, following each one’s own business, will no longer harass the realm. The king’s revenue will go up and the realm will be quiet and at peace. The populace, pleased with one another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors (D. 5)

Government subsidies to the private sector and adequate salaries to service personnel so as to ensure an economically viable society are the proffered answers to the problem of economic instability and resulting violence.

## c. Youth Problems

For a comprehensive survey of the Buddha’s opinions on **secular matters** a primary source is Sigālovādasutta of Dīghanikāya (D. 31) Preached to a teenager, this discourse deals with a wide range of subjects that would be of interest to a lay person:

- what is conducive to a good reputation
- how one's wealth could be safeguarded
- Evils of addiction to intoxicants, frequenting streets at unseemly hours, haunting fairs and clubs, gambling, association with evil friends and idleness.
- Pseudo-friends to be shunned
- Good friends to be cultivated
- How to handle one's income: consumption, investment and saving.
- Obligations to be fulfilled in interpersonal relationships between parents and children; teacher and pupil; wife and husband; friend and friend; employer and the servant; and religious teachers and the laity.

Studiously avoided are references to matters spiritual or religious and the Buddha's own path of deliverance.

A virtuous life in which one avoids killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying is the recipe for a **good reputation**. One risks one's wealth in six ways; namely, by addiction to intoxicants, frequenting streets at unseemly times, haunting fairs and clubs, gambling, keeping company with evil friends and idleness. As if all items fit a matrix, six evil consequences of each of these aspects are listed. For example, **addiction to intoxicants** results in actual loss of wealth, proliferation of quarrels, susceptibility to disease, loss of good character, indecent exposure, and impairment of intelligence. **Gambling**, likewise, results in the addicted gambler being subject to anger as a winner and to grief as a loser, being a loser of actual wealth, being one whose testimony is of no weight in a court of justice, being despised by friends and officials, and being considered unsuitable for marriage on the ground that he is unable to support wife or children. As consequences of **idleness** are enumerated the neglect of work to be done, and the resulting non-accumulation of new wealth and dwindling of the existing wealth, on account of procrastination with such six excuses as "it is too cold, too hot, too early, too late, too hungry and too full."

The discourse repeats **causes of destruction of a person**. In one verse the six causes are: Sleeping till after sunrise, adultery (i.e. "going to women who are to others as dear as their lives"), involvement in hate, violence, evil friends and excessive miserliness. In another are listed addiction to dice and women, drinking, and dance and song, sleeping by day, sauntering in streets at the wrong time, evil friends and excessive miserliness. A similar list occurs in Vyagghapajjasutta of Anguttatranikāya and comprises: debauchery (*itthidhutta* – lit. addicted to women), drunkenness (*surādhutta* = addicted to liquor), gambling (*akkhidhutta* = addicted to dice) and companionship with evil persons. (A. LIV)

The analysis of four types of **pseudo-friends** and four types of **good friends** proceeds with another matrix wherein four comments are made on each pseudo- or good friends. For example, a Buddy-Buddy or word-only friend makes friendly professions as regards the past and the future, treats with useless things, and shows inability when opportunities arise. The Helper-friend, on the contrary, protects one and one's wealth when one is heedless, comes to one's aid in fear, and provides twice as much when a need arises. The importance of good friends is further underscored in Vyagghapajjasutta which, too, is preached to a lay person.

#### d. Money

The Buddha's advice to Sigāla as regards the handling of money is worthy of attention. Not only is he counseled to accumulate wealth for the benefit of the family as a bee collects pollen (i. e. without oppression to the producer of such wealth) but also to see wisely that the wealth grows high like an anthill. Such wealth has to be utilized as follows:

Divide the income into four,  
Binding one's self to friends,  
With one part may you enjoy (consume):  
Invest two parts in your business.  
Save the fourth, so that  
It is there in times of distress.

Having money and being wealthy are not decried in the teachings of the Buddha, even though "wanting the least" (*appicchata*) is highly recommended and contentment is commended as the highest wealth. Of course, there are the accounts of Sudinna and Raṭṭhapāla whose parents tried to tempt them with wealth to abandon monkhood. Their reply was that the parents should put all their wealth into bags, transport them in carts, and drop them into river Gangā where it was the deepest ( Sv. I, 5 and M. 82). Poverty, thus, is appreciated when chosen by monastics. Acquiring wealth in the youth, nevertheless, is declared in the Dhammapada as an alternative to life as a monastic:

Those, who have not led the holy life [or] not acquired wealth in youth, pine away like old herons at a dry pond without fish or lie like worn-out bows, sighing after the past. (Dp.verses 155-156)

Prosperity in this life is regarded as a reward for good Kamma in previous lives as well as the present. In one listing, the possession of wealth is said to generate four kinds of happiness for the laity; namely,

- happiness of having (*atthisukha*),
- happiness of consuming (*bhogasukha*),
- happiness of being free from debt (*anapasukha*), and
- happiness of blameless conduct (*anavajjasukha*). (A. II, 62)

In Vyagghapajjasutta, Dighajānu asks the Buddha for advice for people like him who were encumbered with wives and children, used to luxuries like imported perfume, handled silver and gold and decked themselves with garlands, perfumes and unguents. The Buddha's response was to list four achievements each to ensure happiness in this life and hereafter. As regards this life, he enumerated the following:

1. persistent effort (*utthānasampadā*)
2. security and wariness (*ārakkhasampadā*)
3. good friendship (*kalyāṇamittatā*) and
4. balanced livelihood (*samajivikatā*)

The explanation of items 1, 2, and 4 elaborates the Buddha's views on wealth:

Persistent effort: "By whatever activity a person earns his livelihood, whether by cultivation, animal husbandry, archery (=military service), ministering to kings or any other craft, one is skillful and not lazy, reasons out to ways and means of accomplishing the tasks and is efficient and capable."

Security and wariness: "Whatever wealth a person has justly acquired by dint of effort, strength of arms, the sweat of the brow, or any other right means, one protects it by guarding and watching that kings would not seize it, thieves would not steal it,

fire would not burn it, water would not carry it off or ill-disposed heirs would not take it away.”

**Balanced livelihood:** “Knowing his income and expenditure, one leads a balanced life without being either too extravagant or too niggardly, thinking, ‘My income can be in excess of my expenditure but not my expenditure in excess of income.’ Just as a goldsmith or his apprentice knows by holding up a balance that by so much it has dipped down and by so much it has tilted up, one knows his income and expenditure and leads a balanced livelihood.”

These principles tally with the definition of Right Livelihood (*sammā ājīva*) as one of the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. The kinds of livelihood which are declared wrong as they bring harm to others include trading in arms, living beings, intoxicants and poison, slaughtering and fishing, soldiering, deceit, treachery, soothsaying, trickery, and usury. (Nyanatiloka: Buddhist Dictionary s.v. Magga).

As important as these statements in the Pali Canon on the Buddha’s position regarding money and wealth are the accounts of very close friendships that he maintained with rich and generous donors like Anāthapiṇḍika and Visākḥā. No further proof is needed to dispel the notion that either the Buddha or Buddhism scorned wealth or the wealthy.

### c. Government

The Buddha was equally close to practically all the kings who ruled various kingdoms in the region in which he was active. Though there is no evidence of his having played any direct role in statecraft, he was conscious of separating matters of state from those of religion. For example, no one was permitted to become a monk if he was under obligation to perform any royal duties (Mv. I, 4, 40). When the rising power of Magadha threatened the independence of the tiny Republic of the Vajjis, the Buddha assures that no harm would come to them as long as they adhered to seven principles. With interpretations within parenthesis relevant to modern times, these principles demonstrate another instance of the Buddha’s concern with human welfare:

1. Meet frequently in harmony, discuss in harmony and disperse in harmony (That is, participate fully in public life and affairs, observe the democratic principles of consultation, and preserve harmony in spite of differences.)
2. Introduce no revolutionary laws, do not break the established law, and abide by the old-time norm (That is, to make a balance between the tradition and the modern, and make changes slowly and cautiously and not drastically.)
3. Honor, reverence, esteem and worship the elders and deem them worthy of listening to. (That is, recognize the value and relevance of trans-generational wisdom.)
4. Safeguard the women-folk from force, abduction and harassment. (That is, recognize the importance of women and their need for protection.)
5. Honor, revere, esteem and worship both inner and outer shrines (That is, protect the cultural and spiritual heritage.)
6. Perform without neglecting the customary offerings. (That is, safeguard the practice of religion.) and
7. So assure that saints have access to one’s territory and having entered dwell there pleasantly (That is, be open to all religions and spiritual influences in a spirit of tolerance).

In later Buddhist literature in Pali occurs frequently a list of ten traditional duties of a ruler (*Dasa-rāja-dhamma*). They are i. giving alms, ii. virtuous life or morality, iii. liberality iv. straightness or honesty, v. gentleness, vi. self-control (lit. asceticism), vii. non-anger or pleasant temperament, viii. nonviolence, ix. forbearance, x. non-opposition (J. I, 260, 399; II, 400). A list of three things to be avoided by a ruler consists of falsehood, anger and derisive laughter. (J. V, 120)

That the Buddha upheld democratic decision-making is illustrated by rules laid down for the Sangha. To ensure compromise and consensus particularly in conflict-resolution, each question for decision would be put to the assembly thrice by an eloquent speaker and voted upon after discussion. Arbitration through a committee is enjoined to reach consensus. Only in extremely rare cases would a rule by majority vote be even considered.

Early Buddhism, thus, provides some relevant insights in matters pertaining to government and conflict-resolution.

#### e. Interpersonal Relations

As noted earlier, the central theme of *Sigālovādasutta* is the discussion on obligations to be mutually respected in interpersonal relations. Six groups have been identified and each party in a group is shown to owe five obligations to the other. Such a matrix of arithmetical perfection could have led to some degree of artificiality and triteness. But this does not seem to happen. The six groups cover every imaginable form of interpersonal relations – save between siblings. Each set of five obligations has been thought out with an in-depth knowledge and understanding of human material and emotional needs.

The **parents**, thus, are required to prevent the child from evil, inculcate good qualities, have the child taught an art (i.e. given an education leading to a livelihood), contract a marriage with a suitable partner, and hand over the inheritance in time. The **child** in return has to nourish them in their old age, perform his or her duties toward them, preserve the family and clan (that is, by procreation), protect the heritage, and make offerings when they are dead and gone.

The **teacher's** obligations to the student are to lead him or her to perfect discipline, to ensure that he or she holds on to well-established norms or traditions, to instruct him or her in the knowledge of every art, to spread his or her reputation among his friends and companions, and to provide for his or her safety in every direction. The **student** has to reciprocate by standing up to receive the teacher, by waiting upon him, by obedience, by personal service, and by studying the art or subject diligently.

The **husband** fulfilled his duties toward the wife by respecting her, by not humiliating her, by being faithful, by handing over authority, and by presenting jewelry. The last of the duties coincides with an analysis elsewhere in the Buddhist literature of "the insatiable desires of a woman" as sexual satisfaction, birth of children, and ornaments and jewelry. The **wife** in turn performs her duties well, extends hospitality to relatives all around (i. e. to hers as well as her husband's), is faithful to

her husband, protects what is earned and acquired, and is proficient and industrious in all duties. Taken together the duties between parents and children and between husband and wife, the picture that emerges as the Buddha's ideal of family values and relations confirms deep concern in the stability of the home as the primary unit of society.

The fourth set of interpersonal relations applies to friends. A friend has to treat his or her friend by giving gifts, with pleasant words, by benevolence, by accepting the friend as an equal, and by not disputing. The friend was required to reciprocate by protecting the person and property of the friend whenever he or she was negligent, by being a refuge at times of fear, by not abandoning him or her in adversity, and by showing consideration to his family and relatives.

The next set to be identified consists of employer and servant. Though restricted to household servants at the time of the Buddha, the obligations of each party are valid for employer-employee relations in general as will be shown by comments in parenthesis. The employer has to

- assign work according to strength or capacity (no king-size jobs for man-size employees, as the popular saying goes)
- provide food and salary (no enforced or unpaid labor)
- ensure health care (a specific obligation of the employer)
- share special delicacies (both as a demonstration of human concern and as recognition of good work: e. g. bonuses, perquisites and rewards), and
- grant leave at times (i. e. periods of rest as earned leave).

The employee in return wakes up earlier and sleeps later than the employer, is content with the wages and rewards given, does his or her work well and diligently, praises the employer and spreads his or her fame (i. e. subscribes to good public relations).

The last of the six relationships is between the religious or spiritual teacher and his or her lay devotees. The recluse, priest or minister restrains the lay devotee from evil, establishes him or her in the good, teaches what has not been heard before (=new knowledge), elucidates what has been heard (= reinforces existing knowledge), and shows the way to heaven. The lay devotee's duties are to extend friendliness to the spiritual teacher in deed, word and thought, keep the door open for him or her for unhindered entrance, and supply his or her material needs and creature comforts.

#### f. Exemplary Lives and Exemplars from Narrative Literature and Art

The life of the Buddha is extensively documented. The background for each discourse is described both in the Pali Canon and in the voluminous commentaries on *Dhammapada* and *Jataka*. Together they provide an extensive literary base for the elaboration of the underlying human concerns of the Buddha and his disciples:

The Buddha has time to intervene with children harassing a snake for their delight and to teach an old man a song in praise of his cane so that the public could be aware of the neglect he suffered in the hands of his children. He would not preach to a hungry man but see to it that he is fed before he could join the audience. The Buddha would go miles to save an endangered child or to stop a bandit from killing his own mother. He would wash and treat the sick with his own hands and tell his disciples, "Those who tend the sick do actually tend me." He would rebuke a die-hard conservative for not accepting new ideas and call him a carrier of jute who foolishly

declines to accept gold or silver. He would discourage his disciples from performing any kind of miraculous or magical acts to win over followers and urge that the most effective miracle is that of instruction. To demonstrate the worthlessness of the human body and of the pleasures associated with it, he would auction the body of a dead courtesan until no one was even prepared to accept it free of charge. The Buddha would approach a king to urge that his old state elephant needed better caring. He would similarly go to an outcaste servant woman to prevent her from committing suicide and testify to the innocence of a farmer falsely accused of theft. When disciples quarrel, he takes no side but escapes to the tranquility of the forest. When his own relatives gathered on the battlefield to fight for water to their fields, he would, however, sit amidst the two armies and ask them, “What is more valuable: the life of a human being or water?”

His disciples followed his example:

Ānanda gladly begged for water from an untouchable woman to quench his thirst. Puṇṇa could not be dissuaded from going to a remote region to preach the Dhamma on the ground that the people there were known to be violent. (Culled from Balangoda Ananda Maitreya: *Buddhacarita*, Colombo 1986)

The vast narrative literature in Pali consisting of the 547 Jatakas or stories of the Buddha’s past lives is replete with tales of human interest where the characters are both human and animal. They provide exemplars of ideal conduct for emulation. Each story illustrates a virtue such as charity, gratitude, compassion, honesty, courage, determination, forbearance, perseverance and devotion. (Grey 1990/94) Early Buddhists who were pioneers in the utilization of visual art for educational purposes had these stories depicted in sculpture at such Stūpa sites as Bhārhut, Sānchi, Amarāvati and Nāgajunikoṇḍa. The technique of compressing several incidents of a story to a single medallion or panel testifies to the wide-spread popularity of the stories. The “artistic shorthand” used in sculpture served a mnemonic purpose for parents or guides or for the pilgrims themselves to recollect the events of a narrative which they already knew well.

## 7. From Early Buddhism to the “Theravāda” Tradition of Modern Times

### a. Elements of Early Buddhism in Doctrines and Practices

Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Vietnam have preserved to an incredible degree the tenets, ethics and values of Early Buddhism. The reason for such a faithful transmission is that the Pali Canon along with the voluminous exegetical literature in the form of commentaries (*aṭṭhakathā*), sub-commentaries (*ṭīkā*), explanations (*ṭīppaṇi*) and glossaries (*gaṇṭhipada*) have remained the basic scriptures ever since they were diffused with the twelfth century reformed Buddhism of Sri Lanka. Along with the scriptures came a rich Pali literature which devoted much attention to the history of Buddhism in India and Sri Lanka. The historiography of Early Buddhists was intended for the dual purposes of establishing the authenticity of the transmission of the doctrine and the discipline and the commemoration and thereby the promotion of liberal donations to the Sangha. The history also provided role models to be emulated and among them Asoka the Righteous, the third Maurya Emperor of India, and the kings of Sri Lanka such as Devānampiya Tissa and Duṭṭhagāmiṇi Abhaya figured

prominently. This literature was not only copied and annotated but the literary tradition was further continued in Southeast Asia.

In practice and many of the beliefs held by the adherents, the impact of Mahāyāna and even Vajrayāna remains irrefutable. Even though the human qualities and personality of Sakyamuni Gotama Buddha has not been overshadowed by the supernormal traits of cosmic and dhyāni Buddhas, the popular concept of Buddhahood had undergone much change. It is true that the Buddha is not “prayed” to in traditional worship. Yet, his blessings are invoked as though he is present to grant them. “*Budupihīṭayi*” says the Sri Lankan Buddhist, meaning “May you have succor from the Buddha.” Offerings of food and beverages are made to the Buddha with the invocation “*Adhivāsetu no bhante*” (Venerable Sir may accept our -). A formula exists by which the Buddha is actually asked to forgive one’s faults: *accayaṃ khama me bhante* (Venerable Sir, forgive my fault). Many stanzas in Pali are used in benediction requesting the Buddha’s power (*amubhava*) to ensure good health, success and blessings. (Cf. Mahajayamangalagāthā used widely in the region at the end of a ceremony.) The Buddha is invoked in the course of animistic magical rites as in the liturgy used in such exorcist devil-dance ceremonies of Sri Lanka. An adherent with no modern education, including monastics, would assert the traditional belief that the Buddha was eighteen cubits (27 feet) tall. This region continues to make Buddha statues of immense dimensions as done in Mahāyāna countries but would explain the gigantic size as a representation of the spiritual and moral greatness of the human Buddha. The facility with which the concept of a “divine” or supernormal Buddha and that of a teacher who, as a man, preached to human beings are reconciled or allowed to co-exist is a special feature in the belief system inherent to Southern Buddhism.

The same could be said about the concept of Bodhisatvas and other deities and supernatural beings. Hindu deities are worshipped and prayed to for worldly favors in Buddhist temples. The explanation sometimes is that they are themselves aspirants to Buddhahood or they are friends and protectors of Buddhism. One could see similar parallels in the worship of Nats and Phis in Myanmar and Thailand respectively.

As regards the question of liberation or enlightenment, one looks in vain in Southern Buddhism for the black/white contrast made between the so-called Greater Vehicle and the Lesser Vehicle.<sup>15</sup> Whether such a great divide ever existed in reality or whether it was a figment of imagination of the exponents of Mahāyāna traditions or whether Mahādeva’s four points on Arahants were actually points of controversy between schools or sects are matters for further scrutiny. But as far as the presentday Buddhists of South and Southeast Asia are concerned, they are hardly conscious of any restriction for them to aspire for anything but the state of an Arahant. The Bodhisatva-Arahanta dichotomy is totally unknown to them. As already pointed out, they acknowledge gratitude to a kind and helpful person by wishing him or her to become a Buddha (not an Arahant) and for themselves they wish the eventual entry to Nibbana through any one of the three modes of enlightenment: that is, as a Buddha, a Paccekabuddha or an Arahant. It has also to be conceded that “enlightenment in this very life” is not a priority in the Southern School of Buddhism and the postponement

of one's liberation until all sentient beings of all universes had been liberated is an unknown concept.

The emphasis, on the contrary, is on "making merit" so that one is reborn in a better state: in a human existence with long life, good complexion, happiness and power (*āyu, varṇa, sukha, bala*) or as a *deva* "shining being" in one of the six sensual-sphere (*kāmāvacara*) heavens. Few even among monastics would aspire for birth in a Brahmaloḥa with form or in a formless state, attainable through higher mental achievements called *Jhāna* (Absorptions or Trances). Other than perhaps the monks in forest hermitages, few are known to concentrate on full-time meditation as a means of immediate or accelerated approach to enlightenment and consequently liberation. The triple spiritual training of *Dāna* (liberality or giving), *Sīla* (virtuous or moral life) and *Bhāvanā* (cultivation of the mind or meditation) is pursued by lay devotees for merit-making and the reward normally expected is happiness and prosperity in this world and the next.

Merit making as the main preoccupation of adherents to the Southern School of Buddhism gives an enormous fillip to the practice of all the humanistic principles and values of Early Buddhism. Avoiding harm and injury to all sentient beings and working for their well-being comprise all forms of humane and social services. Feeding and clothing the poor and the orphaned, providing shelter to the homeless, educating the ignorant, caring for the sick and the destitute, providing communal amenities and the like are equivalent to religious obligations. "If one has nothing else to give others one could offer others one's personal service," is an oft-quoted principle when people are organized to do community services. By way of motivation is related such stories as of the young man Magha who was said to have become the king of gods by digging ponds, and making canals for the benefit of humans and animals.

Among the community services to which the Southern School of Buddhism assigned importance is education. The temple in even the remotest village is a center of learning and culture. The average monk is a man of learning, even if his knowledge and skills are limited to rudimentary texts on Buddhism and literacy. A basic education leading to sustained literacy has been provided to at least the boys. To monks this is a way of showing their appreciation to the community which nurtures them. Writing and copying books are similarly pursued as meritorious acts and supporting monks in such services is believed to enable the laity to share such merit.

Thus are the humanistic elements of Early Buddhism fully incorporated into the doctrines and practices of what is called the "Theravada" Tradition of South and Southeast Asia.

#### **b. Impact of Modern Influences**

During the last two hundred years or so a major transformation has taken place in the manner in which doctrines and practices of Early Buddhism are reviewed, conserved and propagated in South and Southeast Asia. Several things, as earlier alluded to, happened all together and all at once. The epicenter of these new developments has been once again Sri Lanka. But their impact extended to the entire region.

The discovery of the Pali language and literature by the emerging oriental scholars of the West was the starting point. The earliest known scholarly notices of Pali in the West are “Essai sur le Pali” (1826) and “Observations grammaticales sur quelques passages de l’essai sur le Pali” (1827) by Christian Lassen and Eugene Burnouf. Within a decade was published George Turnour’s *editio princeps* in Roman script and English translation of the Pali Mahāvamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka. To it was appended a comprehensive – though introductory - essay on Pali literature. A vast literature restricted hitherto to temple libraries and somewhat sporadically and selectively studied by scholar-monks received the attention of a widening circle of Western scholars as well the English educated intelligentsia of South and Southeast Asia. The initial effort came from an unexpected quarter, namely the Christian missionaries resident in the British colonies of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Burma (now Myanmar).

The first discourses from the Pali Canon to be translated and published were *Sigālovādasutta* and *Subhasutta* (D. 31 and 10) by Rev. D. J. Gogerly (JCBRAS I, 2 1846). He also translated *Raṭṭhapālasutta* (M. 82) (Ibid I, 3 1847-48), *Cariyāpiṭaka* and *Vinaya* texts (Ibid II, 6 1853 to 11 1858-59) and *Dhammacakkappavattanasutta* (Ibid IV, 13 1865-66). His colleague R. Spence Hardy published a list of Pali and Sinhala books (Ibid. I, 3 1847-48) and two treatises which for a long time continued to be rated as standard authoritative works: namely, “Eastern Monachism” (1850) and “A Manual of Buddhism and its Modern Development” (1853). In 1855, Viggo Fausboll of Denmark translated *Dhammapada* from Pali into Latin. Bishop P. Bigandet of Burma utilized the written and oral resources of the country and produced in 1858 “Life or Legend of Gaudama the Buddha of the Burmese.” It was a veritable age of discovery for the missionaries and scholars who were impressed with what the newly found literature unraveled. To the intelligentsia of the traditionally Buddhist countries, it was an age of surprise. They had hitherto no access to this rich literature which presented Buddhism to them in a refreshingly new form. The ethical relevance, the philosophical depth, and the overarching commonsense, evinced by the teachings of the Buddha in his own words, appealed to their secular, scientific mindset.

The Eighteen-sixties and -seventies were marked by public debates between Christian missionaries and Buddhist monks of Sri Lanka. Scholars and orators on both sides delved into the scriptures of the opposing party and in some debates a high level of intellectual interest was maintained. A by-product of the extensive study of Buddhist scriptures was the project initiated as far back as 1865 at Pelmadulla in Sri Lanka to revise and rehearse the Pali Canonical texts. The Great Debate of Panadura in 1873 received the attention of a visiting American journalist, J. M. Peebles, who wrote eight articles on the debate. Later he had them published in book form under the title “The Great Debate: Buddhism and Christianity Face to Face.”

While these debates were on, an overall interest in Buddhist studies was shown by young civil servants who were sent from England to administer the colony. (Ludowyck 1966, 232) One of them, Robert C. Childers, published in 1875 the first Pali-English Dictionary and another, T. W. Rhys Davids, paved the way for Pali and Buddhist Studies to be incorporated in the curriculum of Universities in the United Kingdom and subsequently in USA. Rhys Davids’ pioneering efforts to publish Pali

texts along with their translations in English brought about eventually the establishment of the Pali Text Society in 1881. Teams of European scholars in collaboration with scholar-monks and lay scholars of the region ransacked the temple libraries of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Chittagong and Sri Lanka for manuscripts for collation for their critical editions of the Pali Canon. The discovery that Burmese, Thai and Cambodian manuscripts were often superior in accuracy to Sri Lankan manuscripts, which were hastily copied after the 1753 revival, engendered cooperation among national scholars who were keen to publish texts of the highest quality. The resulting interest in the Pali Canon and literature as well as national literatures in different languages was unprecedented. Massive publishing ventures flourished specially in Colombo, Yangon, Bangkok, and Chittagong. The most spectacular achievement of the time was the publication of the Pali Canon in full in Thai script under the patronage of the King of Thailand and its distribution to many centers of learning in the world.

Hand in hand went the restoration of the traditional system of Buddhist education. Pioneering institutions were established in Sri Lanka in the form of Vidyodaya (1873) and Vidyāṅkāra (1875) Pirivenas, popularly called Oriental Colleges. The model was followed in other countries of the region and a network of institutions of higher learning came into operation. Questions of monastic education and discipline, with special reference to Vinaya jurisprudence, were discussed by the leading luminaries in the Sangha in the region and Pali was the language of communication among them. Thousands of letters in the temples of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar and Chittagong which await scholarly scrutiny and eventual publication speak of a period when Southern Buddhism evolved into a unified regional tradition.<sup>16</sup>

Increasing access to literary sources and the renaissance in monastic and lay Buddhist education generated a significant Buddhist revival. At the same time, the academia of the world was taking a keen interest in Buddhism and its culture as a human heritage. For example, the translations of Pali texts by Henry Clarke Warren as "Buddhism in Translations" found a place in the Harvard University's five-foot library of World Classics. Archeological excavation and research established the antiquity and the wide dispersal of Buddhist monuments revealing magnificent achievements in art and architecture. The discovery of the inscriptions of Asoka and their decipherment and translation enhanced the credibility of Buddhist historical data. Asoka himself stood out as an exemplar Buddhist ruler and his "edicts" stood as testimony to the efficacy in practice of the values and principles of Early Buddhism. (Guruge 1993-1)

In the meanwhile, the plight of the Buddhists vis-à-vis politically supported Christian missionaries attracted the attention of the founders of the Theosophical Society in USA, namely, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. Peeble's book had reached Olcott and he started communicating with the senior scholar-monks of Sri Lanka. These links culminated in the visit of Olcott and Blavatsky to Sri Lanka in 1880 and their public acceptance of Buddhism as their personal religion. Olcott devoted the rest of his life to the Buddhist cause and his achievements were numerous. His "Buddhist Catechism", published in Sri Lanka in 1881, was a simple, well-organized and readable introduction to Buddhism and in

several translations and many editions reached the general readership of the world within a few years. He championed the cause of lay Buddhist education to counteract the influence of missionaries and himself established several schools. He criss-crossed Asia speaking to diverse audiences on the importance of reviving their Buddhist traditions and in 1891 brought leaders of several Buddhist schools and sects to accept a fourteen-point common platform on which all Buddhists could agree. But his most far-reaching contribution was the involvement of the Buddhist laity in the study and propagation of Buddhism and the establishment of institutions for the purpose. (Prothero 1996) Two of his proteges, namely Anagarika Dharmapala and Don Baron Jayatilaka (later Sir), not only continued his program but became leaders of the growing Buddhist movement on their own right. (Guruge 1999-2)

With the Mahabodhi Society established in India in 1891, Anagarika Dharmapala internationalized the Buddhist movement by setting up branches in many countries in Asia, Europe and America and mobilizing a growing body of enthusiastic friends and admirers of Buddhism. His campaign in India had two objectives: first, to reclaim for the Buddhists the holy shrines connected with Buddhism (which either lay in ruins or were in the hands of Hindu priests who had no idea of the sanctity which the Buddhists attached to these monuments); and, second, to take Buddhism back to its land of origin through well-organized missionary services. With his Mahabodhi Journal, which became a forum for international Buddhists, and his prolific writings in both Sinhala and English, he came to be recognized as the foremost exponent and propagator of Buddhism. (Guruge 1964 and 1965)

Anagarika Dharmapala had also the distinction of being the spokesman for the Buddhists at the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. His principal address was on "World's Debt to Buddha." (Reproduced in Guruge 1965, 8-22) Conceived as a veritable manifesto of the new form of Buddhism which has evolved in South and Southeast Asia as a result of the manifold activities outlined above, he delved into the humanistic elements of Early Buddhism which study and research had brought to light. The subheadings demonstrate what he saw as the features of Buddhism which the world had to take note of:

**The Dawn of a New Era; His First Message; Human Brotherhood; Religion Characteristic of Humanity; The Theism of Buddhism; Evolution as Taught by Buddha; Moral Teachings of Buddha; The Higher Morality; The Low and Lying Arts; Universal Pity; The Realization of the Unseen; Psychic Experiments; Common Appanage of All Good Men; Prohibited Employments; Universalism of Buddha's Teachings; The Pupil and the Teacher; The Honorable Man; The Master and the Servant; Religious Teachers and Laymen; The Mission of Buddha; The Attributes of Buddha; Buddha's disciples; The Compassionateness shown by Buddhist Missionaries; The Ultimate Goal of Man; The attainment of Salvation; The Spread of the Religion of Humanity; What the Buddhist Literature has Wrought for Mankind; Religion and the Family; Buddhist Brotherhood; Buddha's Exalted Tolerance; Buddhism and Modern Science; Can the Knowledge of the Religion be Scientific? Religion in Relation to Morals; Different Schemes for the Restoration of the Fallen Man; Religion and Social Problems; Religion and Temperance; Benefits Conferred on Women by Buddhism; Love of country and Observance of Law.**

Highlighted in bold font are themes which have been further elaborated by modern exponents of the humanistic elements in Southern Buddhism. These also represent the issues which have dominated study and discussion, research and publication, and formal and informal Buddhist education. The list, of course, has grown. Answers are being sought from Buddhism for pressing issues of modern times such as environmental preservation and biodiversity, violence and insecurity, poverty and imbalances in development, and war, peace, and conflict resolution.

The twentieth century has seen many scholars, teachers, writers and speakers, both monastic and lay, who have given Southern Buddhism a new face and a new meaning. Much has been borrowed from other religious institutions. To Christianity it owes such external trappings as Vesak carols and cards, Young Men’s and Women’s Buddhist Associations, Sunday Schools, organized lay involvement, some forms of congregational worship and the like. Buddhists, both monastics and lay, work actively for the alleviation of human suffering and have evolved diverse institutions and programs for the purpose. They concern themselves with issues of human survival and development and promote nonviolence, peace and conflict-resolution. They strike a balance between such social services and their own spiritual growth through study and meditation. A significant result is that Vipassana meditation in the context of an active life has emerged as a popular modality.

The burgeoning demand by women for a more active role in spiritual life has manifested itself as humanistic aspects of modern Buddhism are stressed. Even within the narrow window of opportunity provided for them as observers of ten precepts or “sīlamātās” (lit. mothers of precepts), the number renouncing lay life has increased steadily and institutions for them are being established throughout the region. Their campaign to receive full and higher ordination as bhikkhunis, too, has achieved significant though limited success.

The sociocultural influence of the Buddhist temple has increased rapidly. In the region as a whole, it is the temple which served to take modern education to rural areas. A galaxy of learned monks and lay persons have achieved international reputation as promoters of Buddhism in the world. The rational, the scientific and the humanistic nature of the Buddha’s teachings is the hallmark of their interpretation. If one calls these developments “Theravāda Tradition”, its historical evolution up to the point that Gombrich and Obeyesekera named it “Protestant Buddhism” should not be overlooked.

## 8. Conclusion

This brief survey of humanistic elements in Early Buddhism and the Theravada Tradition of South and Southeast Asia has led us to several conclusions:

- Theravāda as a label for Southern Buddhism as prevalent in the region is by and large a misnomer because neither the general belief system nor the teachings upheld and emphasized are identical with those of the Theravāda school or sect which existed in the first few centuries after the death of the Buddha.

- The alleged distinction based on the Bodhisatva-Arahant dichotomy no longer applies, even if it ever did, and Southern Buddhism has an open mind as regards how one may reach enlightenment.
- The only thing that has remained unchanged is the reliance on the Buddhist Canon and the ancillary literature in Pali. The Buddhist Canon in Pali which represents the Buddha as a teacher of men and women contains a substantial body of humanistic teachings. Early Buddhism qualifies to be considered Humanistic Buddhism.
- The unification of the Sangha in the twelfth century in Sri Lanka and the modernizing influences of the last two centuries have transformed Southern Buddhism into something entirely new for which an apt designation is not readily available.
- Merit-making predominates as a motivating factor in spiritual practice and the aspirations commonly expressed by devotees relate to success and happiness in this life, rebirth in a happier state after death, and eventual end of suffering through enlightenment as a Buddha, a Pacceka Buddha or an Arahant.
- The broad definition of merit-making enables every form of service to humanity – social, educational, philanthropic, ecological etc, - to be pursued as an integral part of practicing Buddhism.
- Due to the reliance on the Pali Canon and literature, Southern Buddhism preserves the teachings of Early Buddhism, which are effectively diffused to the public through sermons, publications, formal and informal education and electronic media.
- In recent years, scholars, writers and preachers show a tendency to choose for elaboration and propagation those teachings of the Buddha that emphasize his human nature, and concern with the secular well-being of human beings.
- Monastics and the laity, alike, are deeply involved in on-hand activities in community development, poverty alleviation, protection of the environment and promotion of nonviolence, peace, conflict resolution, and overall socioeconomic and cultural development.
- Modern exponents of Southern Buddhism, both monastic and lay, seek to underscore the rational, critical, logical, scientific, tolerant, and open-minded nature of the teachings of the Buddha and, for this purpose, retrieve and reinterpret much data from the rich literature in Pali and equally comprehensive historical evidence and documentation.
- Training in Vipassana Meditation, whether by means of temporary ordination or through periodic retreats, reflects the prevailing need for the pursuit of spiritual goals while being actively engaged in daily life.
- The increasing involvement of women in the new form of Buddhism is characterized by the large numbers who chose to renounce lay life and the steady efforts made to restore in the region the full ordination of women as bhikkhunis.

NOTES

1. Cf. definition and references in Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition):  
Theravāda [a. Pali, lit. 'doctrine of the elders'.] = Hinayana.  
[1875 R. C. Childers *Dict. Pali Lang.* 545/1 The adj. *theravādī* (*theravāda*..) means holding the orthodox doctrine.]  
1882 W. Hoey tr. *Oldenberg's Buddha* i. i. 75 The Church of Ceylon remained true to the simple, homely, 'Word of the Ancients' (Theravāda).  
1923 Ld. Ronaldshay *Lands of Thunderbolt* vii. 48, I shall refer to it as the Thera Vada—'the way of the Elders'—because this is the title which its adherents themselves prefer, the term Hinayaona being objectionable to them.  
1959 *Encounter* Jan. 19 Theravada Buddhism stems directly from the Indian tradition.  
1978 C. Humphreys *Both Sides of Circle* xii. 132 My own list, however, was far wider than Olcott's 'Fourteen Fundamental Principles', which were largely confined to the Canon of the Southern or Theravada school.
2. Bhikkhu Ñānamoḷi (1972, 13) translates this passage as follows: "I could speak with knowledge (*ñānavada*) and assurance (*theravāda*)" depending on the Commentary which explains *theravāda* as *thirabhāvavādaṃ* (=statement of stability and hence assurance) and adds "*thero aham attho*" (The meaning is I am a *thera* or an elder). As commentators display a tendency to invent etymologies based on the similarity of words, I am inclined to think that the word *Theravāda* existed in the same sense that the Buddhists use: i. e. the doctrine of the elders.
3. This formula of nine or ten qualities of the Buddha is common to all traditions of Buddhism just as the other two formulae in praise of the Dhamma, the teachings, and the Sangha, the community. They occur in identical sequence in the Pali Canon as well as Mahāyānasūtras.
4. The contribution of Western scholars to the Buddhist revival which took place in Sri Lanka and radiated to the rest of the region will be discussed further in Section 7b. For a more informative analysis, see Guruge 1984.
5. I have called this expression infelicitous because it suggests the kind of division that took place in Christianity with the Reformation. (Guruge 1993-1, 136). I do, however, agree that an identifiable new form of Buddhism did develop and is in vogue in the region. I would prefer a more precise term like "Modern Southern Buddhism."
6. See Note 1 above.
7. Bhikkhu Ñānamoḷi (1972) has been extensively utilized for Canonical references on the life of the Buddha. I have considered his translations as well as those in Pali Text Society publications and made such changes as I found desirable to be closer to the original Pali, for which I depended entirely on PTS editions.
8. See Note 2 above.
9. Representations of the Buddha-to-be in penance (called "Fasting Buddha") had been a popular theme in Gandhara sculpture. See Heinrich Zimmer: *The Art of Indian Asia*, Bolingen Foundation, New York 1955 Vol II, Plate 65.
10. Pali *Uttarimanussa* means "above or beyond the state of a human" whereas *Lokottara* signifies "supra-mundane, above or beyond the world."
11. For a detailed analysis of textual evidence on the life of the Buddha, see E. J. Thomas 1927/1949, 16-164.

12. Information available on the life and career of Asoka, including his inscriptions are subjected to a detailed study in Guruge 1993-1.
13. Ajantha Cave No. 17. See Heinrich Zimmer: Plate 174.
14. Introductory stories from the Dhammapada and Jataka commentaries are available in English in Burlingame 1921, Parts I-III and Cowell 1895/1990.
15. The sharp demarcation which students of comparative religion have made between Northern and Southern Schools of Buddhism and copied from book to book without verification needs to be widely discussed to eliminate some of the misunderstandings shared by serious scholars of religion in the West. See Huston Smith 1986, 186-187.
16. A sample of the communications of Sri Lankan scholar-monks with Western scholars as well as their Southeast Asian counterparts has been studied with the results published in "From the Living Fountains of Buddhism". (Guruge 1984)

#### ABBREVIATIONS

A	Anguttaranikāya
Cv	Cullavagga
D	Dīghanikāya
Dp	Dhammapada
DPPN	Dictionary of Pali Proper Names by G. P. Malalasekera
EZ	Epigraphia Zeylanika, periodical of the Archaeological Department of Sri Lanka
It	Itivuttaka
M	Majjhimanikāya
Manu	Laws of Manu, tr. Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (Penguin Classics)
Mt	Majjhimanikāya Commentary
Mv	Mahāvagga
Pac	Pācittiya in Suttavibhanga
S	Saṃyuttanikāya
Sn	Suttanipāta
Sv	Suttavibhanga
U	Udāna

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## 原始佛教與南傳佛教中的人道觀

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### 摘 要

本文將從不同的人道主義定義著手，人道主義首先著眼於人類的利益與理想、著眼於人格的完善、著眼於一種把人類和人文價值高於一切的哲學觀念、以及撇開抽象理論專注在博學與實修之士的務實的態度(參考 F.C.S. Schiller and William 的例子)。原始佛教是指佛教巴利文經典與阿含經中所記載的佛陀教義，本文將闡明一般人把原始佛教與南亞和東南亞所盛行的南傳佛教混為一談的原因。從歷史上來看，南傳佛教有其獨立傳統，其教義具有特定的性質。當斯里蘭卡的三支佛教教派(大寺派: Mahavihara, 無畏山寺派: Abhayagiri 和 祇多林寺派 Jetavana) 於十二世紀融合時，南傳佛教遂告結束，從此發展並傳播至南亞與東南亞的佛教包括所有的以巴利文大藏經和論疏文獻的一切佛教傳統，經十八九世紀改革之風，現代所盛行的南傳佛教則是具有靈活性、寬容性並隨西方基督教價值觀的影響而得到加強。

本文參考釋尊個人自傳式的陳述，及巴利文經典與其論注，說明釋尊以人身現示在世人面前，教化眾生如何以自身的努力來開發自我，以達到離苦的境地；而這種究竟完善的目標是人人可成就的。

同時也顯現出，釋尊之教義並未只局限在個人精神的解脫之道上，並且也顧及到日常生活的事宜，佛經中有諸多例證指出釋尊強調人類的平等性、人命的神聖以及在家居士所應注意的道德規範。而就現代的社會問題而言，教義中也提到女性在社會應享有的平等對待、母親與妻子在家中的地位、貧窮、青少年問題、如何管理金錢與經濟、以及政府問題。也涉獵到人於人的相互關係問題：一系列親子、師生、夫妻、朋友、精神導師與學生等等，這些教義的原則與價值理念都記載在諸多的經典文著中，同時也展現在佛教的藝術創作上。

結論將指出原始佛教中所提及的三個人文主義要素，進一步提出現代佛教在南亞及東南亞的情形，其中特別要說的是，修行功德已延伸到對社會的救濟與服務，及協助社區發展。最後特別提及，現今在家居士對止觀禪坐修習的興趣，以及南傳佛教對重建比丘尼組織的努力。

When Buddhas first appear in this or any other world, their disciples are generally very pure beings who are able to benefit from constant contact with a Buddha. For this reason, the first moral injunctions of the seven buddhas of this world were stated simply and in a general terms. In the beginning there was no need for detail in these matters. *The Verse of the Seven Buddhas* reveals the purity of those times in its simplicity. The verse says:

*Do no evil ever.  
Do good always.  
Purify your mind.  
These are the teachings of all Buddhas.*

— Grand Master Hsing Yun: *Only a Great Rain*, Wisdom, Boston, P. 24