

A TRUE EQUALITY¹

Widya Sakyabhinand²

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to trace the concept of equality as conceived by Buddhism in order to propose it as a solution to the global environmental problem. To complete this task, the Western concept of equality and the human nature according to Buddhism have also been considered. It is here the doctrine of the Dependent Origination (Paticcasamuppada) in which we have found the source of the Buddhist concept of equality—an equality not only between human and human but also between human and nature.

1. Introduction

One issue that plays a prominent role in the history of moral and political philosophy is the concept of equality. Its underlying questions are : (a) whether human beings are equal, (b) whether human beings should be treated as equal, and (c) the nature and source of inequality, the failure to attain the ideal (Gould and Kolb, 1964 : 242).

Although most the analyses are still different in these basic issues, the doctrine that by nature human beings are all equal seems to crop-up our minds most. With regard to my concern, I will concentrate on the third one. However, as we have known, the United States is creditably among the first countries which regards equality as an official doctrine and has still committed herself to this doctrine through the policy of human rights in her internal and external affairs.

¹ A paper presented to the Table Talk Forum, arranged by Program for Ethics, Science, and Environment, Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, U.S.A., on May 22, 1995.

² Dr. Widya Sakyabhinand, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Philosophy and Religion.

Equality seems to be the word of the day. One who is blind to the problems of human rights, and the rights of other natural beings, is not contemporary in his/her thought. There have been campaigns for generations to realize these problems, that through equality other social problems like scarcity, poverty, prostitution, child labor, etc. may have been solved accordingly (Bennett, 1991 : 372).

However, I may humbly say that equality as defined in English dictionaries has some limitations in its meaning. I will take this issue in details later.

2. Freedom and Equality

If we look at political theories, we will come to realize the relationship between freedom and equality. Some are of the opinion that individual freedom is something superior, which they believe is the source of equality (Locke, 1988 : No. 123). But, on the contrary, some regard it as a source of inequality (Marx, 1977 : 23-24). According to the latter, the more individual freedom one has, the more inequality it breeds in society. The only way to prevent equality from inequality is to socialize everything, even human activities themselves.

Both, however, agree that human beings by nature are egoistic. But there remain differences in some points of view. The liberal tradition believes that beside being egoistic human beings are also rational (Molesworth, 1962 : 14-15 ; Cassirer, 1954 : 99). Through education they will grow a sense of responsibility, and not rely on motive alone. In fact human beings are biologically akin to animals. But rationality is the foremost that makes them different from animals. Addition to this rationality is human freedom (Marshall, 1994 : 217). But some who hold a materialistic point of view seem not to believe that human beings are also rational. For them, the way to deal with egoism is an application of rules and orders being extreme in character.

Most people today will agree with how to deal with human egoism as conceived by the liberals. However, I must say that the true equality is still not brought about by the liberal idea. This is another issue that I will take into account later.

3. Poverty of Definition

Equality, as we have known, means human beings are all equal in respect of their rights, opportunities, franchise, treatment by the state, earnings and application for social services, and being treated without racial and sex discrimination (Gould and Kolb, 1964 : 243). Our young generations are always taught to repeat it in this manner so

that our future societies will be abundant with people who are equal minded.

You may not know that in some societies the people's understanding of equality is not the same as in the United States. For them, equality is we can do anything we want because we are equal, though according to the law it reserves different meaning. Equality itself has become the problem of such societies. I will have nothing to do with this. My only purpose is that when you look into the problem of human rights in some societies, the social milieu must also be taken into account.

What I am concerned about here is the poverty of definitions as given to words, particularly in our ordinary literal uses. All such definitions stem from a human egoistic point of view. We define human as a rational being (Gove and others, 1981 : 1885), animal a sentient being interior to man (Funk and others, 1965 : 111). From an "animal" point of view, I would comfortably say that this may not be applicable. It is the same as our definition given to a tiger a carnivore (Neilson, 1940 : 2645), though human beings themselves consume animal most. The Longman Dictionary recently defined Bangkok the capital of Thailand which is famous for prostitution. Fortunately, we are not like animals that turn a deaf ear to this oversimplification of definition. We immediately responded and asked them to delete it out.

Definition is very important, since it is related to an idea in itself. This also indicates our world-view. Human beings act in accordance with his/her world-view. Right or wrong view is always followed by good or weak performance (The Dhammapada, 1978 : No. 1). We are sometimes convinced of some actions. But the proper outcome is not always apparent. They, in return, create more problems. What we must do is to think them over. Things remain unsettled may be due to the means that were applied, or, since the beginning, the limitations of our world-view.

For example, equality in our understanding is between human and human in the eyes of the law. This is why we have overlooked the rights of other natural beings and natural things like plants, mountains, rivers, etc. That is why we have come to realize at the expense of environmental deterioration we have created. So, we are now in need of new and a proper definition of the word "equality" if we would like to keep our earth worthy of inhabitation.

4. An Opposition to Equality

I have just explained that human world-view through various definitions as given to words has some limitations. Why is it so? What causes such limitations? What prevents us to grasp the correct meaning of equality? The answer is undoubtedly

"human egoism"³. The liberal tradition would understand this concept. But unfortunately, its knowledge of egoism is egoism itself. Egoism deceives us not to know what it really is.

Having dealt with some problems, we often resort to some effective measures through political means. But the foremost is to look into human mind. Social systems would not be so important if the humans who run these systems are corrupt. Egoism is a sort of ill-mind. If there would be any inequality among human beings, it is due to its enemy, namely, egoism of which we can identify as-intolerance, dogmatism, greed, selfishness, pride, arrogance, discrimination, anger, lie, etc. All is immoral in its character. Egoism makes the people think we are superior, others inferior. There still exist the caste system in India, the economic classes in the Capitalist societies, inequality between sexes, the hierarchy of the proletariat and so on as long as the human mind is engaged in egoism.

In brief an obstacle that prevents us to grasp the correct meaning of equality is ourselves. As the human beings, we are different from other natural things as we have minds. An intention of the mind is to produce activities (The Book of the Gradual Sayings, Vol. III : 294). Human beings with the mind of egoistic intention will exploit themselves, human fellows (The Book of the Gradual Sayings, Vol. I : 196), and, of course, nature for their own interest.

5. A True Equality

In some societies, people may enjoy their political equality, but because of egoism, they still live an unequal life. It is unequal between human beings and nature. They behave as if they were alone on earth. They try to manage and manipulate nature, making it of his own, although in fact they belong to nature.

Being egoistic, we use the term "management" or "control" in approach to nature. These terms do not demonstrate human as a part of nature at all but rather master of nature. If we go through definitions in the area of applied sciences today, we will come up with an element of human egoism over nature, being so arrogant and covetous. Nature is nothing in our eyes but objects of boundless needs. An advancement of technology means to take more and more from nature.

³ Egoism is the state of mind or thought, being from our attachment to worldly objects which we contact with through our senses. It is equated with the ideas of 'self', 'soul' or 'atman' in some schools of philosophy. With egoistic minds, human activities will always lead to suffering (Discipline, Vol. IV : p. 16).

Human beings' approach to nature in this high-tech age is not to sustain their existence in the course of nature. It is something as "greed" in English or "Lobha" in Buddhism. We will notice someone is greedy if his/her desire for something is so voracious. Then who will, in return, notice us so if everyone in society is of the same degree of desire, being so greedy? To chase when it is hungry, to photosynthesize after getting a sunlight, to grow when it rains enough, etc.-all is nature in its course. But human approach to nature is very exceptional.

The time requires us to think about a true equality. It is an equality not only between human and human as earlier defined but also between human and nature before the law of nature. How can this new idea of equality be brought about ?

Firstly, it is to realize that things in nature need each others. The Buddha's teaching of the Dependent Origination (Paticcasamuppada) can represent in this context. According to the doctrine, all things in the universe are intrinsically interconnected (The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. II: 23). Thus nothing can exist alone without its relations to another thing. The term "control" or "management" illustrates nothing but human relations to nature. Human beings, in fact, can never control nature. For the sake of their own survival, they must comply with the law of nature. Whenever they try to be independent of nature because of their egoism, they will face the serious problems of environmental deterioration as the world is now facing.

Secondly, in their relation to nature, human beings are not determined absolutely by the law of nature. They, in response to nature, are the beings who act with their own intention. They learn to utilize nature for their own sake. This is the thing that makes human beings so proud in themselves and different from others in nature. However, there would be no problems from them as long as they incline to live in the course of nature. They must act as a good member of nature to which they belong, in the same way as their societies require them to do. One of the things is to respect the rights of other natural things.

Thirdly, it is to realize how harmful egoism is. To live does not mean to take a lot from nature in order to gratify one's desire but is to lessen egoism. The true equality between human beings and nature could not be brought about if egoism continues to dominate in human mind.

The above mentioned is a way to bring up egoism to the state of non-egoism, that is, to have a clear understanding in human relation to nature.

6. Conclusion

My intention is to look deep into human mind. Because what we have in thought will always transfer into actions with happiness and/or suffering as their outcome. Happiness is something peaceful in mind. It is knowledge of things as they really are, so to say, knowledge of interdependence of things. Human beings with an egoistic mind-set will never have true happiness, but more and more suffering. Because what they are interested in is nothing but themselves. Then, how can such people understand others and live with them with a sense of "equality"?

Before ending I would like to say a few words, just like an appendix to my speech. It sounds like a paradox that the people with a political inequality in the developing countries still practice religions of indigenous tradition, going to worship trees, rivers, mountains, etc., but with nature they seem to live an equal life; and that the people with political equality in the developed countries are very scientific minded, but with nature they take a lot from her and produce more waste being very harmful to her than any other on earth.⁴

What do these two people mean by "equality"?

⁴ The point in this concern is that it is not the case that the people with a political inequality in the developing and underdeveloped countries have no egoism in their minds. Because of lagging behind in technology to take more from nature, they seem to live an equal life with her. They, in fact, believe the same as the people anywhere else that only through an advancement of technology they can meet their wants. Technology plays a leading role in our modern societies, even to characterize degrees of human egoism in approach to nature. We may have come to realize the negative side of technology in doing harm to nature. That is not enough. Technology should not have been made the goat for taking the blame of the environmental destruction we are creating. If something is needed to take the blame in this regard, it must be human egoistic mind, not technology.

REFERENCES

Bennett, A. LeRoy. 1991. **International Organizations, Principles and Issues**. 5th ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice Hall.

The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya) Vol. IV. 1951. Trans. by I.B. Horner. London : Pali Text Society.

The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Amguttara-Nikaya) Vol. I. 1979. Trans. by E.M. Hare. 2 nd ed. London : Pali Text Society.

The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Amguttara-Nikaya) Vol. III. 1973. Trans. by E.M. Hare. London : Pali Text Society.

The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Samyutta-Nikaya) Vol. II. 1922. Trans. by C.A.F. Rhys Davids. London : Pali Text Society.

Cassirer, Ernst. 1954. **The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau**. New York : Columbia University Press.

The Dhammapada. 1978. Trans. by Narada. 3rd ed. Kuala Lumpur : Syt. Chip Seng Trading Sdn. Bhd.

Funk, I.K. and others, eds. 1965. **New Standard Dictionary of English Language**. New York : Funk and Wognalls.

Gove, P.B. and others, eds. 1981. **Webster's Third New International Dictionary**. Springfield : G & C Meriam.

Gould, Julius and Kolb, William L, eds. 1964. **A Dictionary of Social Sciences**. New York : Unesco.

Locke, John. 1988. "Second Treatise", In **Two Treaties of Government**. Ed. by Peter Laslett. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Marshall, John. 1994. **John Locke : Resistance, Religion and Responsibility**. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.

Marx, Karl. 1977. **Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844**. Moscow : Progress Publishers.

Molesworth, Sir William, ed. 1962. **The English Works of Thomas Hobbes. Vol. II.** Oxford : Scientia AAlen.

Neilson and others, eds. 1940. **Webster's New International Dictionary**. 2nd ed. Springfield : G & C Meriam.