

# Equality - Why It Cannot Be Achieved? : A Buddhist View<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to inquire into the failure to attain the social ideal called "equality" from the Buddhist stand - point. The inspiration to have "equality" by one's own is due to its relevance to our current issues on rights - human rights, the women's rights, and the children's rights, etc.

In Buddhism, it is the human ego-centric mind which plays a dominant role in human activities and thus keeps humans away from the ideals. The ego-centric mind comes into being due to the Five Aggregates of Attachment, of which the most prominent feature is identified with the First Personal Pronouns, namely, "I", "my", and "I am" in our language.

It is noteworthy that equality as known in our political life is not equality as conceived by Buddhism. It is nothing but an ego-centric mind. That is why the more we rely upon it, the more we are moving away from this ideal.

## 1. Introduction

The proposition "human beings are all equal" is something attractive. It at least admits that behind all differences there is something equal about human

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beings, though in some respects such as social position, social advantage, wealth, and importance, we are inferior to others.

We may have been confused as to whether human beings are all equal. The answer given to this issue seems to differ among moral and social philosophers. Yet a view that by nature human beings are all equal seems to be approved by everyone who believes in an egalitarian ideal, and by all political systems which identify themselves with the public interest and seek legitimacy to rule from the people.

Equality has become an ideology of all political systems which regard inequality among human beings to be irrational. However inequality such as unjust treatment by the state, sexual discrimination, violation of human rights such as women and child laborers, racism, religious intolerance, inequality of opportunity, etc., opposed to the underlying principle of equality, is still prevalent in all societies.

All the instances exemplified above are not only current issue. It is as old as human history itself. Where we in our generation differ is in our awareness of the dangers brought about by our human fellows, having laid down some social measures to prevent the exploitation of one by another. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights made by the United Nations in 1948 is an endeavor among members to arrive at the underlying spirit of equality.

I, therefore, would like to say that the answer as to whether human beings are all equal must not be something speculative in accordance with our philosophical tradition. The pertinent answer to this question must be found in human beings themselves. It is in Buddhism in which we have found all accounts about human nature pertinent to this issue, and which has inspired me to share with all the participants.

## 2. The Beginning of Buddhism : An Analysis of Human Nature

Materialists may be of the view that the more advances made in Science, the more human nature we understood. But some who follow the Platonic tradition will be of the opinion that behind being human there is something unknown to which all human beings are subject. A clear understanding on this supernatural agent is to admit our knowledge of human nature. These two philosophical ideas are not new to students of Buddhism, and have been known as annihilationism (Ucchedaditthi) and eternalism (Sassataditthi). Since the Buddha's time, all Buddhists have been required to avoid these two ideas.

In Buddhism, to understand human nature is to look into human beings themselves. This kind of human understanding may have been regarded as the starting - point of Buddhism, as the Buddha in the Samyuttanikaya declares:

*It is in this fathom-long carcass, friend, with its impressions and its ideas that, I declare, lies the world, the cause of the world, and the cessation of the world, and the cause of action that leads to the cessation of the world*  
(The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. 1: 86).

Therefore, according to Buddhism, an analysis of an individual person to the Five Aggregates (pancakhandha) is to understand human nature. The summary account of the Five Aggregates is matter (rupa) and mind (nama). Both are momentary, subject to changes, and nothing to be recognized as permanent ego, self, or soul.<sup>3</sup> It is a knowledge of non-ego (anatta) in Buddhism.

It is well-known that the only aim of Buddhism is to get human beings out of suffering. So the nature of mind is of special interest in Buddhism (in contrast to Science which is interested in something physical), and has been named according to its mental activities - feeling (vedana), perception (sanna), volitional activities

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise mentioned, the term 'ego' will be mentioned later in this work.

(samkhara), and consciousness (vinnana). These mental activities have been explained in detail by Buddhism according to their role in the human mind.

One of the most famous Buddhist verses that demonstrates the importance of mind is thus:

*Mind is the forerunner of states. Mind is chief ; mind-made are they.  
If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one,  
even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox (The Dhammapada,  
1978, No. I).*

According to Buddhism, it is because of the mind's perception of the world, that human beings experience happiness or suffering in their lives. The Anguttaranikaya says that it is not sensual objects that bring sensual pleasures but our mind (The Book of the Gradual Sayings, Vol. 3: 201). Also the Samyuttanikaya has the same account that because of contact by our sense-organs with sense-objects, thus arises the world (The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol. 4: 20). Both imply that all phenomena exist in accordance with their nature but produces consequences an attachment to phenomena. Only the competent mind will realize things as they really are, and not be subject to desire.

On the other hand, the Buddha's particular attention to the nature of mind corresponds to his doctrine of Karma. Human beings are the only beings who act with volition. To perform activities, volition is always a forerunner (cetanaham kammam vadami) (The Book of the Gradual Sayings, Vol. 3: 294). Bad or good action is subject to the basic nature of mind. An action with the fit mind (kammaniya) will benefit the individual and society as a whole.

The Buddhist aim of an analysis of human nature is nothing speculative but an inquiry into the human reality in order to provide an appropriate way of human existence.

### 3. Ordinary Human Beings : The Prisoners of an Attachment

For Christianity, it was because of the Original Sin of Adam that we had to suffer. But, for Buddhism, we have to suffer because we, as ordinary human beings (puthujana), are inclined to believe that the Five Aggregates are permanent ego (*The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Vol.3: 82-84*). Such a belief, according to Buddhism, is self-contradictory. The real nature of the five Aggregates, in fact, is subject to change (aniccata), has to suffer (dukkhata) and lasts for only a moment (anatta). To attach to the Five Aggregates as the permanent ego is to admit that everything is unchangeable, permanent, eternal, etc. of the Five Aggregates, and thus arises suffering.

It is desires (tanha) - desire for sensual pleasures (kamatanha), desire for an existence (bhavatanha), and desire for non - existence (vibhavatanha), that make ordinary people take the Five Aggregates as the permanent ego for granted. Being dominated by these desires, arise in our mind the ego-centric minds of "this is mine" (etam mama), "I am this" (esohamasmi), and "this is my ego" (eso me atta) (*The Vinaya Pitakam, Vol 1: 14*). If the father of the modern philosophy, Rene Descartes, began his philosophical postulate to prove an existence : "I think, therefore, I am", this may be replaced by the Buddhist maxim: "I am, therefore, I suffer". A proposition "I am" (or "I exist") refers to desires deeply rooted in the human mind.

Buddhism calls the mistaking of non-ego for an ego "the Five Aggregates of Attachment" (upadanakhanda)<sup>4</sup>. A Pali term "upadana" means clinging to, grasping, or attachment. The following are the nature of an attachment as described in the Dighanikaya (*Dialogues of the Buddha, Vol. 3: 222*). All demonstrate human behavior and world-outlook deep-rooted in an ego-centric mind.

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<sup>4</sup> The term "ego-centric mind" seems to be ethically appropriate to notify human behavior occasioned by the Five Aggregates of Attachment, and will be referred to wherever its demerit needs to be exposed in this work.

### **3.1 Attachment to Sensuality (Kamupadana)**

Assuming that there is an agent to perceive human beings attach to sensual objects such as form, sound, smell, taste, tangible objects, and mental objects being desirable, try to get more of them, continue to have them, and feel disappointed when they fade away. Attachment to worldly power, prestige, dignity, and rank, is also this kind of attachment because all help to make sensual pleasures easily possible.

### **3.2 Attachment to View (Ditthupadana)**

To maintain the status quo and to have a better status are to be supported by some principles. Any principles which agree with ones' own account will be upheld. On the contrary, human beings will feel more insecurity if they are opposed by certain principles. For the sake of their own survival, they will protect their principles at any costs.

An attachment to certain theories, philosophies, ideas, and doctrines is also an attachment to view.

### **3.3 Attachment to Mere Rule or Ritual (Silabbatupadana)**

In order to perpetuate ones' own worldly existence, one needs some rules, regulations, methods, rituals, and ceremonies to perform. Attachment to them, either mistaking the rules for principles, or mere an imitation without an insight into their spirit, may cause harm both to the individual and to society. This attachment is something like 'Bad Faith' in Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy.

### **3.4 Attachment to the Ego-Belief (Attavadupadana)**

Instead of an understanding that the existence of things is something conditional, human beings fool themselves as to the permanent ego that they can manage and control this world of existence, and they perceive all things desirable or undesirable. Similarly, the misconception of there being the supernatural power that controls the universe and the mundane existence, is also an ego-belief.

It is noteworthy that "selfishness" seems to be the term spoken in every language, to mark somebody who is too much concerned with his/her own interests. The term admits not only the existence of an ego-centric mind, but also human suffering brought about by the ego-centric mind. However, we often look at others, when we speak of someone who is selfish. We hardly look at ourselves. That is because that we do not want to threaten our own existence, keeping an ego-belief alive.

Upadanas as earlier described have troubled individual and society in various ways. Regarding the individual, they cause something physical symptoms like certain diseases and nervous disorders, and some human characteristics like self-interest, narrow mindedness, exploitation, envy, hypocrisy, greed, pride, arrogance, lies, discrimination, intolerance, etc. Consequently, they have to suffer physically, feel some hatreds from others, or may have been penalized if such characteristics are considered illegal and as being harmful to others.

Regarding society, they may damage rules and regulations. Being collectively ego-centric, people will be very self-interested, taking an advantage of loopholes in the rules and regulations, interpreting them to suit their personal gain. Any principles they cannot accommodate are considered irrational. For example, if people of all walks are of the public mind (e.g. a less ego-centric mind), then democratic principles will be more useful to society. On the contrary, in the society where the people are of the individual mind (e.g. a more ego-centric mind), democratic principles are nothing less than instruments for personal gain and as justification for some interest groups.

The ego-centric mind is nothing but kamatanha, bhavatanha, and vibhvatanha dominating the human mind. Being influenced by these desires, people will always feel insecurity for their existence and fear of loss (as against the principles of changes). It is noteworthy that our philosophical ideas and scientific theories are almost always occupied by the ego-centric mind.

Detailed accounts on Upadanas may clarify the following questions :  
Why does power corrupt? Why do people become fanatic and intolerant? Why do friends become foes after achieving power? Why do people exploit each other? And why do ego-centric oriented cultures become prevalent in all human activities?

#### **4. First Personal Pronouns : The Languages of an Attachment**

Recently, some philosophers have involved themselves in research into human languages. According to them, language is a symbolic expression of the facts of experience, and thus is the picture of reality (*Pitcher, 1964: 77*). Buddhism may approve it whole-heartedly. An action (karma) being bodily, verbal, or mental, according to Buddhism, will represent what human beings have in their mind. Human beings with the Five Aggregates of Attachment, have also their own language. It is an ego-centric mind language, especially the languages of the First Personal Pronouns, e.g. "I" (aham), "my" (mamam), and "I am" (asmi) (*The Middle Length Sayings, Vol. 1: 232*). All is ego-centric in tone. The strong or normal expression is subject to more or less attachment in human mind. Yet, whatever human beings are concerned with, will always be with this ego-centric mind characterized through First Personal Pronouns.

Other Personal Pronouns are in fact from the First Personal Pronouns. For example, dependent on the ego-centric minds of "I" and "my", come into being those of "he/she" and "you". These languages are not only communicative, but also ego-centric. "He/she" or "you" is logically equivalent to "not-I" or "not-my", and so implies disunity. Any conflicts among diverse groups in society are always due to the strong collective ego-centric mind of "not-I", or "not-my".

With regard to our concern, the ego-centric mind of "I am" (esohamasmi, asmi) is the most interesting, being called by Buddhism "conceit" (mana). According to the Mahanidesa of the Khuddakanikaya (*Mahanidesa*, Part 2:426 ), conceit is mental haughtiness (cittassa unnati) because of one's own respective conditions of existence such as family, status, wealth, achievements, and even figure. There will be more or less conceit behind these propositions - "I am the Prime Minister", "I am the General", "I am the Professor" , "I am the business man", "I am a woman", "I am a man", "I am poor", "I am rich", and so on. The Mahanidesa characterizes the ego-centric mind of conceit thus : "I am superior to" (seyyohamasmi), "I am inferior to" (hinohamasmi) and "I am equal to" (sadisohamasmi) (Ibid.) . Human expressions and behavior in connections with others and themselves will always be motivated by conceit. Conceit is not always presented in the form of simple propositions as above but also of the complex propositions being very specific and difficult for outsiders to understand as in the languages of scientific theories, political ideologies, religious teachings, and philosophical ideas.

Human beings have, in fact, nothing to be called the permanent ego. Because they do not know things as they really are, they not only cling to the Five Aggregates as permanent ego, but also create another pseudo-ego, namely, an ego-centric mind of conceit or "I am" (asmimana). For example, being from a business background, people will have a certain style of living, world-view, attitude towards problems, etc. of their own, different from people in other professions. They will feel with themselves to be "better" (superior to) "bad" (inferior to) or "level with" (equal to ), when they compare themselves to others in respect of status, family, wealth, achievements, etc. So the pseudo-ego is the business man ( I am the business man).

The strong conceit by manner or words may create some problems for peaceful co-existence and good understanding among people. For example, the

typical behavior of people after collectively thinking "I am superior to" will be arrogant and to disparage others, of those after collectively thinking "I am inferior to" will be a feeling of frustration or of hatred, if they come to realize that such an inferiority is not natural but by product of their political life, and of those after collectively thinking "I am equal to" will be one against another as visualized by Hobbes. (*Stumpf, 1978: 201*). Therefore, Buddhism regards an ego-centric mind of conceit as similar to an arrow by which someone has been hit, and has to suffer.

## 5. Buddhism : True Equality is a Non-Ego-Centric Mind

A proposition : "A and B are equal" may be either about facts or value. The former will be something descriptive, but the latter normative. Equality in its normative meaning will concern us in this article.

A normative equality has been developed since ancient Greece by the noted philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. However, its liberal trends have been propounded between the 17th and 18th centuries by the modern philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. The democratic movements that spread over Europe and America in the later periods till the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, have been influenced by these liberal thinkers.

In brief, a history of equality in the West has two noteworthy features :

*First, a theme that behind all differences of talents, merits and social advantages there is some characteristically human nature by virtue of which all human beings are equal. Second, the focus of egalitarianism that shifted continuously, now attacking the differential treatment of the Barbarian and Greek, now of freeman and slave, noble and commoner, black and white, rich and poor, male and female. (The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Vol. 3 : 40).*

Although Buddhism never stresses in a speculative manner that by nature all human beings are equal, it does not reject egalitarian doctrine of equal political, economic and legal rights for all human beings. Buddhism repudiates caste system. All people irrespective of the caste, class, age and sex can join the order (Sangha community), and if they are able enough, they can equally gain the ultimate goal in Buddhism. Before the law of Karma everyone is equal by his/her actions. "Good" or "bad" is viewed from human action itself, not from birth, lineage, caste, rank, and so on. Human beings must treat each other compassionately because we are friends who share suffering and happiness.

However in very society (including in Buddhist society), a normative equality in practice does not become forced. The exploitation of humans by humans is still prevalent. A liberal thinker like Thomas Hobbes might be of the view in this context that besides being equal by nature human beings are egoistic (*Stumpf, 1987: 200-201*). Buddhism has nothing against Hobbes' insight. All ordinary human beings (*puthujana*) are always ego-centric. Hobbes found the origin of egoism in the human mind, namely, desire. But where he has differed from Buddhism is his failure to give detailed accounts as to the origin of desire, its effect on ethical life, and how to overcome it, as Buddhism has done. This seems to be the first dissimilarity between Hobbes and Buddhism.

The next dissimilarity is about the concept of equality. According to liberal thinkers, by nature all human beings are equal. But Buddhism conceives such an understanding as something based on an ego-centric mind. A proposition "I am equal to" (*sadisohamasmi*) is nothing less than conceit as explained earlier.

This is not the case if someone is of the view that propositions such as "I am superior to", "I am inferior to", and "I am equal to", are individual rather than collective. Buddhism, in fact, envisages social changes from an individual perspective. As each individual is so is society. Therefore dependent on the individual thinking of superiority, come into existence in human history the cultures of legitimacy of

the nobles, monopoly of all knowledges by the upper class, and planning of social development by the bureaucrats without participation of the local people. Likewise, dependent on individual thinking of inferiority, arises the collective hatred of the oppressed and the down-trodden.

On the other hand, dependent on individual thinking of equality, arise the liberal cultures with emphasis on freedom, rights, liberty, and equality of individuals. The most typical in its political life is Democracy in which competition to carry out political activities and to make business is freely allowed. One is obliged to respect another. Being ego-centric, free competition has brought about an economic gap between the rich and the poor, unfair distribution of wealth, the waste of natural resources, and environmental deterioration. All may be said to be the crisis of Liberalism.

Although egalitarian ideal is of great advantage to human beings, in practice it is still apparently similar to other social ideals like peace, freedom and brotherhood, etc. which cannot be put into practice in daily life. It is because all ideals must begin first in the human mind, then come to fruition through underlying principles. Being dominated by ego-centric minds, social ideals are nothing but a day-dream.

## 6. Equality in the 21st Century

Not being a sociologist, I cannot predict trends of equality in practice in the 21st century. But as a Buddhist I can say that the future of equality is dependent on how much a danger we realize the ego-centric mind to be. If not, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations will become stagnant, and so the future of equality is still in darkness.

Because of the misunderstanding that equality is something external, not being from the mind, human beings had to suffer from some political

ideologies which promised us with egalitarian ideals. History may have to repeat itself if we still have the wrong idea that social ideals are something given, not to be created first in our mind.

It is noteworthy that after socialism, the world has come to associate with another social movement, namely, Feminism which believes in equal political, economic and legal rights between men and women. No fair-minded person is against this movement. But it would be very regrettable if the movement became egoistic movement. If so, we can anticipate the conflict between the sexes either in the family or in the workplace. The beautiful feminist ideal may yet be another ideal which cannot come true.

Most of the people always rely on the idea that what is natural is always justifiable. So to attach to the Five Aggregates as an ego is nothing wrong because it is everyone's nature. This argument is no less than an appeal to number, being equal to a proposition "I can smoke because everyone smokes here" though it is a no smoking area and smoking itself is dangerous to health. If so there would be nothing wrong with exploitation, lies, intolerance, corruption discrimination, hypocrisy, etc. being characteristics of an ego-centric mind.

Similarly, some may be of the view that a complete non-ego-centric mind, according to Buddhism, requires the complete eradication of all desires. For example, only a person who realizes the Arahantship is able to eradicate the ego-centric mind of "I am" (mana). In comparison to the rest who are ordinary people, very few people are able to acquire the state of Arahantship. So what would we do with the rest, who are the ordinary people, and form the greatest number of people? It is impossible for all of them to overcome desires dominating the human mind.

In fact, the Buddha says nowhere about complete non-ego-centric mind of all people. His main intention seems to have the ordinary people realize things

as they really are in daily life. Merely an awareness of the danger of the ego-centric mind is beneficial enough for human beings, let alone a completely non-ego centric mind. If we look at some human activities today, we will see opposition to an ego-centric mind in disguise. For example, there have been campaigns among generations to be aware of the environmental crisis, extinction of wildlife, the waste of natural resources, deterioration of the quality of life, and the exploitation of humans by humans. In fact, these campaigns are against the ego-centric mind. According to some people, the waste of natural resources, for example, is because of our material progress, not an ego-centric mind. For Buddhists, it is because of an ego-centric mind standing behind material progress, and follows the waste of natural resources. It is very regrettable that human beings have come to realize the danger of an ego-centric mind after they have had to suffer. Prior to this, they were inclined to indulge their desires.

Therefore, according to Buddhism, it is only a non-ego-centric mind, being natural, that will bring us true equality in the 21st century.

## 7. Conclusion

My only purpose is to look deeply into the human mind. Human conduct being bodily, verbal, or mental are related to our mind. According to Buddhism, there are two things on which our beliefs are based : ego-centric mind and non-ego centric mind. The ordinary people's mind is always based on the ego-centric mind which will hurt them and their fellowman.

Human beings with an ego-centric mind in all activities will never experience true equality. Not only ego-centric minds of "I am superior to", and of "I am inferior to", have prevented us from a peaceful co-existence in human history, but also an ego-centric mind of "I am equal to" will have done the same thing, if human beings do not realize how harmful the ego-centric mind is.

"Equality" as an ideal will be more beneficial for all people, if in practice everyone has been considered and treated equally either by the state or by fellow humans. The two idioms : "to be considered" and "to be treated" imply mental recognition of each another. Human beings with an ego-centric mind hardly recognize anyone, though before the law and in God's eyes all human beings are equal and therefore it is difficult for the underlying principle of equality to come true in society.

Regarding the ego-centric mind of conceit, a collective thinking "I am equal to", might have ruined Democraey in the same way as collective thinkings "I am superior to", and "I am inferior to" had ruined the Aristocracy and the so-called Dictatership of the Proletariat in the preceding decades respectively. It is noteworthy to keep in mind that nothing external can ruin all the systems unless they have ruined themselves internally first. The destructive cause of any ruins is already rooted in the ego-centric mind of all human beings.

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