

The Awakening and Possible Salvation

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 6 min read

Bhante Bodhidhamma Bewildered. Anxious. Rudderless. ‘Cometh the hour, cometh the man’ Following on from last month’s Tip, we can take it that Liberalism is a political and moral system that focuses on individual rights – particularly individual liberty and the right to own property, along with limited government. This presents us with three problems. The first, understandably after the authoritarianism of the medieval ages with kings and Roman Catholic hegemony, is the accent on the individual. This lacked the importance of society, man as a social being. After all we are our relationships, but this is so hard to see once we define ourselves as separate individuals. In fact it was only from 1610 onwards that the word individual, coming from the Latin in-dividuum – not dividable, began to refer to a person as such and by 1815 had become another ‘ism’ – individualism as opposed to communism and socialism! These latter two were attempts at reintroducing the idea of a person in and of society. And there are those who call for the Enlightenment to be reshaped by other philosophies such as Confucianism, Ubuntu and First Nation philosophies which centre the person back into society and nature. The second is the loss of existential meaning. Christianity was undermined by the growing dominance of science. If it can’t be measured, it doesn’t exist! Many people have no deep reason for living, a meaning that goes beyond self-preservation and self-indulgence. This is supported by a consumer mentality and an economic system based on acquisitiveness. It has replaced a self-transcending purpose with individual material gain. This can lead to a nihilistic lifestyle of just keeping oneself entertained or to a crisis of meaning that can lead to depression and even suicide. The third is that Liberalism is a rehash of the Christian myth of progress. That the world began with God. It was corrupted. Jesus came and saved it. It will end with the Rapture or when all bodies rise from the graves anew and the Kingdom will arrive on earth. This is the underlying myth of all Western idealisms. So it is that idealisms are future driven. They always presume they will end up in a wonderful and perpetuating society. They are based on a false premise and set an impossible goal. There is an apocryphal story that at a Moscow conference the question of achieving a perfect Communist society was discussed. When someone asked: ‘What about accidents?’ a long silence followed, until a voice was heard to say: ‘In a Communist Society there will be no accidents.’ Consider the more realistic Indian myth, perhaps, of eternal beginnings and endings, an endless rotation where sentient beings display their delusions. This is the world of Samsara, ever onward going, never arriving at a static heavenly place. Human life will always be a struggle, sometimes less so than others. It was from this world the Buddha found an escape: it was to be in the world but not of it and eventually out of it completely. So, what do we do and where do we go from here? Many undeveloped ideas are fermenting. If we are to take Buddhadhamma as a guide, even though it developed in a very different period, its baseline attitudes can become a guide to future thinking. In the Buddha’s time, there were no ideologies or system thinking. This

was before reading and writing allowed us to think about thinking. Yet there are objective truths about human beings as there are objective truths in science. Just as science talks about system theories, how everything impinges on something else, so in the mental sphere humans impinge upon each other, more so now with social media. And the basis of the Buddha's teaching is that there is a level of suffering and the suffering we cause to others that is caused by a delusive sense of self. This manifests as acquisitiveness, aversion and fear. So here we have a way of knowing when we are acting from an unwholesome basis. When these are replaced with non-greed, non-hatred and non-fear, it follows that wisdom and compassion arise naturally. It is the good heart that will develop a good mind and a good mind that will develop good systems and a caring society. So instead of reason with all its -isms being our guide, reason should be at the service of our benevolent intention. Instead of ideologies, practical wisdom, one that arises out of connection with others and caring for others. The operative attitude is caring, caring for humans, for animals, for plants and for the mineral world. Such practical wisdom grounds us in the present, working with present conditions to better them. And let the future take care of itself! As an example of the Buddha's own pragmatic approach in creating an institution, he once saw some monks carrying large amounts of cloth for making robes. He decided to find out for himself how many were really needed. In the cold season, he lay down to sleep with his lower and upper robe and soon found he needed another robe (a 'robe' is basically a large sheet!) and, as the night grew longer, yet another. So he was able to formulate a rule that monks were allowed only a lower and an upper robe and to carry another two upper robes that were sewn together. It was in this way that the Vinaya, the rules and regulations, were formulated. The Buddha did not have some idealistic idea in his mind. He wanted to establish an institution that would allow its members to devote their lives to the study and practice of the Dhamma, that would sustain through time and that would support the spiritual needs of lay members. This he achieved through a compassionate and practical response to circumstance. Even though many rules of the Vinaya are not applicable, they remain as pointers. The Sangha, the community of monks and nuns, is over 2,500 years old. The Buddhadhamma also offers a solution to the lack of meaning without any belief either in a transcendent state, Nibbana or in a God. There are two ways we can transcend the self-seeking individual that leads to isolation, alienation and loneliness. The first is to connect with others and begin to see oneself in relationship. A conversation is exactly that. It is not me talking to you and you to me, but us talking to each other. We are not simply communicating – email, texting, chatting - we are co-relating. (I have in the past talked of Ubuntu, the South African philosophy that is encapsulated in the phrase: I am because we are.) Of course, open to rebirth and transcendence, life takes a deeper meaning. The opposite to the vices of selfishness such as generosity, patience, kindness, compassion and rejoicing necessarily evolve. We are our relationships. This is why the Buddha tells us good companionship is the whole of the spiritual life. And the operative motivation is to develop metta, a universal, unbiased kindness. To achieve that we must acknowledge the human being as an expression of the Dhamma, the Buddha Within. Eventually we see we are all undeveloped Buddhas trying to get on with each other. The second is to uproot the notion of an individual self through the inner investigation of insight meditation, vipassana. The two, of course, go hand in hand. Finally, if caring and pragmatism are to

be the basic guides, capitalism can also be made to serve the common good and so can social media. Indeed, the whole of society can be changed for the benefit of all. And there is a way in which we can approach this. John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher of the modern area, has given us a Theory of the Veil of Ignorance. Put simply, if we were conscious before we were born and we did not know what circumstances we were going to be born into, in what sort of society would we want to find ourselves. How such an approach pans out into economics, social organisation and politics will depend on the culture we are in. Hopefully, the West will develop an approach out of the good heart that will help us to rise out of the present chaos towards social well-being and harmony. Many thanks to Denis, Martin, Jim and Therese for their comments and a special thanks to Therese who also edited the essay.

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