

A Buddhist approach on Freedom of expression: An Asian Approach

Sugath Mahinda Senarath

University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

There are three major schools within Buddhism namely, Theravada(the school of the Elders), Mahayana(the Great Vehicle) and Vajrayana(the Diamond Vehicle). There are many similarities among these different schools. This study focuses on freedom of expression based on Theravada Buddhism.

The field of communication studies has mostly been represented by Western frames of reference. Some scholars, say such studies reflect Anglo -American bias. Buddhist phenomenological approach would be new genre for studying communication. The Buddhist approach can be applied for every social, economic, political and ethical ground.

This paper shows that Asian traditional, philosophical teachings can be applied for contemporary communication issues and problems.

Key words: Kalama Sutta, Middle Path, Four Noble Path, Eight Noble Path, Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

The field of communication studies has been skewed by Western frames of reference and they do not adequately “represent a sample of all possible conceptual positions from which knowledge of communication can be adequately constructed” (Miike,2002:1). There is a debate on de-westernization of communication theories. De-Westernization discuss the criticism of predominately euro-American ethnocentrism in academic knowledge production(Glück,2018). It is looking for a revision of the global academic power relations in knowledge production and dissemination (Glück,2018).However, it seems that non western scholars have also been not ready to open their mindset for producing knowledge based on their traditional, cultural, political and philosophical ground rather than being highly depending on western theories. “In order to expand and enrich current U.S-Eurocentric conceptions of human communicating, non -Western scholars in the discipline of communication ought to rethink the nature of communication theory from indigenous and comparative perspectives”(Miike,2002:2). However, this does not mean that neglecting western communication theories and concepts but balancing the East and the West. “In the past two decades , as mass communication departments and schools across Asia have grown, there has been an increasing debate about de-westernizing communication theory, at least that taught in Asian institutions. It should be called “balancing” rather than “de-westernization”(Seneviratne,2018:10).

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN ASIA

Today we discuss widely about freedom of expression and media freedom. The concept of individual rights and freedom of expression we refer to today are derived from the West.

As Kalinga Seneviratne (2018) clearly pointed out, ‘Mass communication courses taught in universities across the world are usually based on Western concepts of communication with heavy focus on individual rights and freedom of expression. In Asia, where the protection and promotion of community and social

harmony plays an important role in political and social discourse, media practitioners' focussing on individual rights over community harmony, sometimes creates unnecessary conflicts that could be avoided by more sensitive and mindful communication strategies that would have the same result of opening up public and community space for more freedom expression'(Senevirtne,2018:xii).

It is important to study traditional roots of Asian human sciences in-order to mindfully address their communication issues and problems.

As professor Wimal Dissanayake (1988:6) noted: "If Asian scholars are to come up with models of communication which bear the imprint of their own cultures and which will enable them to comprehend better and conceptualize more clearly the complexity of human communication, it is indeed imperative that they shake off the influence of the mechanic Aristotelian model. They need to address their mind to the task of finding out how best they can draw upon the cumulative wisdom of Asian human sciences as a means of formulating theories and models of communication that reflect the cultural ethos of the people, and for that very reason, are more pertinent and heuristically useful".

Asian human sciences are based on Hindu, Buddhist, Confucius and Daoist philosophical teachings and ideas. But the question is, are Asian communication scholars well-versed about these philosophies (Seneviratne,2018).

According to the Buddha's teaching the highest and the lasting path to welfare is the relinquishment of greed, hatred and delusion – which are the root cause of suffering(Barua,2021) and overcoming of these existential situation is the realization of the Four Noble Truths.

The model of communication we practice in Asia is borrowed from the West(Senevirtne,2018).It leads to severe problem among many countries. High consumerism, neglecting human values, can be seen in this model. For instances, as Seneviratne(2018:xii) describe The term "development communication" was coined for communication where the communicator was supposed to wean away the peasants from their traditional lifestyles into a more consumption-oriented society. So tradition become old-fashioned, and greed became synonymous with development /modernization. The East was supposed to embrace the West's wisdom and discard their own "mythologies". But today, in the third decade of the 21st century, Eastern "mythology" is becoming modern wisdom. In this regard to be remedy for the problems in Asia with regards to development, the media practitioners can be follow the Four Noble Truth as a guide.

Table 1: Four Noble Truth and understanding issues and problems

Each Noble Truth	Meaning	Duties in Deal with it
<i>Dukkha</i>	Suffering or dissatisfaction	To comprehend suffering .To know location of the problem.
Samudaya	The cause of origin of dissatisfaction or suffering.	To eradicate the cause of suffering. The diagnose the origin.
Nirodha	The cessation or extinction of suffering.	To realize the cessation of suffering. To envision the solution.
Maggha	The path leading to the cessation of dissatisfaction or suffering.	To follow the right path through actual practices.
Source: Kalinga Seneviratne (ed) (2018). Mindful Communication for Sustainable Development: Perspectives from Asia, India: Sage, p. 6.		

Buddhism posits three characteristics that define worldly existence. They are impermanence(anitya),

suffering(dukkha), and no-self(anatma). These characteristics are very closely linked (Dissanayake, 1983:29).It is not to be misunderstood that being sensitive to other’s suffering means become sad ourself. Instead as Goneka (1987) mentioned we ‘should remain calm and balance’, so that we “can act to alleviate their suffering”. *“If you also become sad, you increase the unhappiness around you; you do not help others, you do not help yourself. Because the wisdom is lacking. A life without wisdom is a life of illusion, which is a state of agitation, of misery. Our first responsibility is to live a healthy, harmonious, good life for ourselves and for others. To do so, we must learn to use our faculty of self observation ,truth observation”* (Goneka, 1987).

One of the key principles of Buddhist teachings is “pratitya samuppada” or “dependent co-origination”. According to dependent co-origination all things and phenomena are interdependent. The dependent co-origination summarized by the Buddha as “when this is, that is . From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t that isn’t. From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that”(Piyadassi Thero,2008).

“Another important aspect of dependent co-origination which has deep implications for communication theory, is that the relationship between the cause and effect is one of mutual dependance. Therefore, to refer to them as “cause” and “effect” would be misleading because that would presuppose the clear priority of the causes”(Dissanayake, 1983:32). *“This Buddhist line of thinking is definitely in tune with the suggested non-dualistic, non-dichotomous Asia-centric epistemological assumption”* (Miike, 2002,p.7).

Kalama Sutta

Buddhism permit and admire free thinking and expression. In *Ambatta Sutta*(canon) Buddha says “Ambattaya, even the little Quail can crip freely in her nest”. *Kalama Sutta* , Anguttara Nikaya of Sutta Pitika further shows that how Buddhist teachings have been given space for free thinking and expression of ideas. This sutta describes that “the text has a whole has been interpreted as advocating or rejection of anything that contradicts rational thought or empirical understanding”(Barua,2021). *Spirit of the Kalama sutta highlight a teaching that is “exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance”*(Soma Thera, Tr, 1994)“Free thinking is the means or method by which one’s welfare is achieved”(Barua,2021).

When the Buddha and his disciples arrived in the city of Kesaputta, the Kalamas who were inhabitants of Kesaputta approached the Buddha and expressed doubts about his teaching. The Buddha said to them : “It is fitting for you to be perplexed, Kalamas, fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter”(Bodhi,2012:280). He then offered instructions to the Kalamas about skepticism, arguing:

“Come, Kālāmas, do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cognition, by acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think: ‘the ascetic is our guru’. But when you know for yourselves: ‘these things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if accepted and undertaken, lead to welfare and happiness’,then you should live accordance with them” (Bodhi,2012:280).

The instruction of the Kalamas is famous for its encouragement of free inquiry; the spirit of the sutta signifies a teaching that is exempt from fanaticism, bigotry, dogmatism, and intolerance(Soma Thera, 1994).

According to the Sutta there is a criterion for acceptance too. “Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another’s seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, “The monk is our teacher’. Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: “These things are good; these things arenot blamable;

these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness, enter on and abide by them” (Bodhi,2012:280).

The law of dependent co-origination based on the Middle Path(madhyamā pratipada) avoids attachment to the two extremes. The Eight-Fold Noble Path (Arya Astangika Margaya) is the fourth of the Four Noble Truths. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the Middle Path (majjhimā paṭipadā) is not a condition between two extremes, it lies between the two extremes ,neither too lessen as hedonism nor too strict as asceticism. The Buddhist Middle Path is transcending both axes of extremes. This is different from The Golden Mean” and the “Confucian doctrine of the Mean”(Senarath,2015).

The Middle Path is precious to applying in solving any problem, including communication issues and problems(Senarath & Dissanayake,2016).

Eight Noble Path

Right understanding, Right thought, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, Right concentration are known as the middle path. The eight factors of the Eight-Fold Noble Path are not steps to be followed in sequence (Bodhi,1984,1999)and “they can be more aptly described as components rather than as steps, comparable to the intertwining strands of a single cable that requires the contributions of all the strands for maximum strength(Bodhi,1984.19994:12).

The Eight-Fold Noble Path factors can be divide in to three groups as (1)moral discipline (*silakkhandha*) [right speech, right action and right livelihood]; (2) concentration(*samadhikkhandha*) [right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; and (3) wisdom (*paññakkhandha*) [right view and right intention(Bodhi,1984.1994, Ubesevara,2019).All of these factors are interconnected and depend on one another.

Duta Sutta, qualities of a messenger

The Duta Sutta in the Culla vagga of the Vinaya shows the qualities of a messenger. There are 8 qualities he declared. 1. good listener (sota); 2. able to make others listen(sevata);3.good listener (uggaheta);4.good memorizer(has a good memory) (dhareta);5.knower(s/he has a good understanding(vinnata);6.instructor(s/he able to makes others understand)(vinnapeto);7.s/he is skilled regarding what is beneficial and not (kusalo sahitahitassa);8. S/he is not quarrelsome(no kalaha,kariko) (Tan, Tr.2014).

Right View (samma ditthi)

Right view is the forerunner of the entire noble eight-fold path. “It enables us to understand our starting point, our destination, and the successive landmarks to pass as practice advances (Bodhi,1984.19994:44).In communications, right view is important. Communicator need to have a deep knowledge, understanding of the issue or problem, while able to think on the consequences of the messages before it is sent to the audiences.

The second factor is called right thought(*samma sankappa*). But more effective translation from the original pali might be right intention(Holms,2021).The Buddha explains right intention as threefold: the intention of renunciation, the intention of good will, and the intention of harmlessness(Bodhi,1984.19994;Holms,2021). The three are opposed to three parallel kinds of wrong intention(Bodhi,1984.19994). They are intention governed by desire, intention governed by ill will, and intention governed by harmfulness” (Bodhi,1984.19994;Holms,2021). The communicator should be a very responsible person and s/he pay much attention of the content of the message(s). Messages to be in the view of solving issues and problems

and positive change of the humankind.

Right speech (*samma vaca*) is the third of the eight factors of the Eight-Fold Noble Path. The right speech means abstaining from false speech (*musavada veramani*), abstaining from slanderous speech (*pisunaya vacaya veramani*), abstaining from harsh speech (*pharusaya vacaya veramani*), and abstaining from idle chatter (*samphappalapa veramani*) (Ubeseekara, 2019).

Right Action (*samma kammanta*), Right livelihood is concerned with ensuring living in a righteous way. It aims at promoting moral, honorable and peaceful conduct. Right action means refraining from unwholesome deeds that occur with the body as their natural means of expression (Bodhi, 1984.19994 :49). The Buddha mentions three components of right action: abstaining from taking life (*panatipata veramani*), abstaining from taking what is not given (*adinnadana veramani*), and abstaining from sexual misconduct (*kamesu miccha-cara veramani*) (Bodhi, 1984.19994: 49). In this regard communicator should help others to live in a peaceful and honorable life in the righteous way.

Right Livelihood (*samma ajiva*), means that one should abstain from making one's living through a profession that brings harm to others and living a honorable, blameless and innocent life without harm to others (Rahula, 1974).

Right Effort (*sama vayama*) is the energetic will (1) to prevent evil and unwholesome states of mind from arising, and (2) to get rid of such evil and unwholesome states that have already arisen within a man, and also (3) to produce, to cause to arise, good and wholesome states of mind not yet arisen, and (4) to develop and bring to perfection the good and wholesome states of mind already present in a man (Rahula, 1974).

Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*) (or Attentiveness) is cultivated through a practice called "the four foundations of mindfulness" (*cattaro satipatthana*). "The mindful contemplation of four objective spheres: the body, feelings, states of mind, and phenomena" (Bodhi, 1984.19994:73); (1) the activities of the body, (2) sensations or feelings, (3) the activities of the mind and (4) ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (Rahula). Wrong view can lead to wrong mindfulness and this will turn wrong concentration as well (Walpole, Walpole & Toneatto, 2022). "In the practice of right mindfulness the mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event. All judgments and interpretations have to be suspended, or if they occur, just registered and dropped" (Bodhi, 1984.19994: 70).

Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*) means establishing the mind right way. "Concentration represents an intensification of a mental factor present in every state of consciousness" (Bodhi, 1984.19994:86).

Eight Noble Path can be applied for all types of communication including sustainable development.

Communicator as a *kalyanamitta* (spiritual friend).

Kalyana mitta can be described as "a slayer of evil, a provider of good" (Tan, Tr. 2014). There are eight characteristics of spiritual friendship (*kalyana mitta lakkhana*). They are, faith (*sadha sampanno*), moral virtue (*sila sampanno*), learning (*suta sampanno*), charity (*caga sampanno*), effort (*viriyaya sampanno*), mindfulness (*sat sampanno*) samadhi (*samadhi, sampanno*) and wisdom (*panna sampanno*) (Tan, Tr. 2014). S/he cultivates right view, right intention, right speech, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and concentration.

CONCLUSION

The current "free media" journalism theory of "watchdog" journalism has created an adversarial communication culture that encourages and drives conflict rather than helping to resolve them. Using the

principles of Kalama Sutra(which is similar to the free media theory) and aspects of the Noble Eight Fold Path as right insight, right thought, right speech and right action the communicator(ie. journalism)need to look at how a problem can be solved not add fuel to the fire by directing accusing fingers and promoting slogan shouting. The right insight would involve looking at a problem in all its dimensions especially by speaking to the people at the grassroots who are negatively impacted by the issue. Right thought involve the journalist absorbing and analyzing the material gathered to understand the issue better without being swayed by propaganda(known as Public Relations today).Right speech and right actions involve crafting your report in such a way that you do not involve in hostile reporting designed to attack one party or another; instead you present the facts and its interpretation in such a way it will help further free inquiry by listening to verify of viewpoints and looking at ways of resolving the problem. This could be described as a "critically appreciative" style of journalism rather than a "hostile "one .Buddhist middle path approach would involve the journalist encouraging a give and take attitude rather than winner takes all approach. For example, reporting on the Ukraine issue today will involve taking into account Russia's security concerns, as well as Ukraine populations desire to live in peace. It would need not to encourage arming one party as a path to solve the crisis, and also take into account the economic and social havoc created by the conflict across the world. Journalist need to encourage dialog between a variety of parties involved in the conflict in order to achieve a middle path of give and take to stop the war. In that type of journalism compromise should not be presented as a loss of face or losing the war.

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