Humanistic Values in Buddhist Literature through the Life of the Historical Buddha: From Human Suffering to Universal Liberation

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***Abstract*—This paper analyzes Buddhist texts for humanist values, particularly regarding the historical accounts of the Buddha's life and the shift from individual suffering to universal emancipation, which he proposes as an essential normative and educational paradigm for the contemporary world. While Buddhism has remained focused on the metaphysical and doctrinal character of the system, the present study emphasizes the human side of the Buddha, an aging, ill, and dying individual, who, like many, is confronted with the social injustices of the world. From this perspective, the Buddha's human experience is the basis for an alternative moral discourse. Using narrative and literary techniques, the author of this paper shows how the Buddhist narrative of the Buddha's life and literature, as a whole, is a model for ethical training fostered through compassion (karuṇā), wisdom (paññā), moral virtue (sīla), and the teaching of interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), and therefore, the path to liberation is both individual and social.**

Research engages with pivotal moments of the Great Renunciation, the Enlightenment, the First Sermon, and the founding of the Saṅgha. It draws implications for the present-day development of the discourse on human flourishing, social justice, and global citizenship education. The cultivation of the ten pāramīs, generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity, is argued to provide coherent and systematic alternative formulations of virtue ethics of a humanistic nature as opposed to a utilitarian or individualistic model. Moreover, it suggests a combination of psychological and structural changes to address the pressing issues of the contemporary world, including, but not limited to, social and economic inequality, violence and wars, polarization of society, and the ecological crisis.

By connecting Buddhist humanistic thought and traditions with modern ethical and pedagogical development, this article suggests that the life of the Buddha is a classic example of a trans-cultural model of humanism that is liberating, and that such a model can be used to develop a healing and transformative framework for ethical and civilizational development of the world. The results point to the need to reclaim Buddhist texts in the contemporary world for moral and ethical reconstruction and leadership on a global scale.

***Index Terms*—Buddhist Literature, Value of Humanism, Historical Buddha, Human Suffering (dukkha), Universal Liberation (nibbāna), Ten Pāramīs, Compassion (karuṇā), Wisdom (paññā), Human Sustainability, Interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda), Moral Education, Humanistic Education.**

I. INTRODUCTION

The historical Buddha refers to one of the most constructed narratives describing an influential ethic and philosophy that has, in one way or another, molded the cultural, literary, and moral practice of Asia for over 2,600 years. The narrative surrounding Siddhattha Gotama goes beyond the so-called religious biography. It offers an extensive, fully developed humanistic approach to suffering, inequality, and the conflicts and fragility of our human existence. He begins his teaching by addressing suffering, not circumventing or denying it. In his first discourse, the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, after his Enlightenment, he states, "Birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; association with the unloved is suffering; separation from the loved is suffering" (SN 56.11; Bodhi, 2000,

pp. 1843–1847). Buddhism positions itself around suffering, or dukkha, and emphasizes that it is not an abstract idea, but rather a reality that we all experience. The following is true: the ethical essence of Buddhism is the cultivation of compassion and the surrounding responsibility to act. The initial point of the Buddha's moral vision is indeed the existence of suffering (Harvey, 2000, pp. 14–17).

Most current scholarship appreciates Buddhist literature as more than a collection of spiritual texts, as it serves as literature for the construction of humanistic values, personal development, and social change. Given the current conditions of the world, including geopolitical unrest, economic inequality, psychosocial distress, and ecological crisis, the humanistic aspects of the Buddha's life and his teachings, as he moved from personal suffering to the liberation of all beings, can guide the rethinking of human development and of our collective responsibility. Keown (1992) points out that Buddhist ethics is teleological rather than deontological, oriented toward the fulfillment and perfection of human nature (pp. 231–232). This means that the Buddhist way, as he tried to describe, is the way of moral development and the flourishing of self and others, and it is not solely the way of ascetic self-heroism, or the observance of the rules of the path.

In contemporary studies of Buddhism, the doctrinal, ritual, and metaphysical frameworks most often ignore the dimensions of Buddhism that are most human and ethical. Paṭiccasamuppāda, anattā, and nibbāna are the conceptual systems that most classical studies emphasized. In contrast, far too little attention has been given to the moral and transformative narrative that the historical Buddha's life story inevitably evokes. The value of this goes beyond a mere ethical contribution; it includes the sociocultural dimensions that are reflected in the narrative. When it comes to the interdisciplinary studies of the global ethics, humanistic education, moral psychology, peacebuilding, and sustainable development, the gap in scholarship, most, if not all, has focused on the importance of karuṇā, paññā, and sīla and has not adequately examined the episodes in the life of the historical Buddha, such as the Four Sights, the Great Renunciation, his struggles with the extremes of asceticism, and his enlightenment experience under the Bodhi tree, as exemplary stories of what it means to be human. Queen and King (1996) elucidate that the world's suffering must be embraced, and so, a person must inwardly transform with the suffering (pp. 16–17). This perspective sketches the transformative dimensions of social and ethical liberation, and, most importantly, the awakening experience.

This paper attempts to construct a narrative-ethical framework of Buddhist literature centered specifically on the historical Buddha to fill this gap. It explores the construction of moral narratives of the intertwining of awakening and social responsibility across historical and founding moments of Buddhism, including the First Sermon at Sarnath, where the Buddha teaches the Middle Way. The Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta outlines the paths to liberation as paths to the direct, experiential knowing of the mind, as well as the unwholesome (DN 22, Walshe 1995, pp. 335-350). His stated rejection of the practice of extreme asceticism, along with the Middle Way, illustrates a particular philosophical and existential synthesis. It reinforces the idea that liberation is an integral and fundamental aspect of being human, and not a metaphysical concept. Similarly, the founding of the Saṅgha represents a radical ethical move that flouts the impositions of the caste, patriarchal, and social status systems. In Sn I.7, Buddha teaches that not by birth is one noble, but by deeds is one noble (Sn I.7, v. 142; Bodhi, 2017, p. 178). This statement is a critique of a putative aristocracy of virtue and grants all people, without exception, an immanent and intrinsic worth, thus aligning with modern humanism.

The Ten Pāramīs represent the principles of perfection and play an essential role in the story. They include: generosity (dāna); virtue (sīla); renunciation (nekkhamma); wisdom (paññā); effort (viriya); patience (khanti); truth (sacca); determination (adhiṭṭhāna); loving-kindness (mettā); and equanimity (upekkhā) (Bv II.117–167; Horner, 1975, pp. 20–23). As a whole, the pāramīs function as an overarching system of virtue ethics directed at the cultivation of an awakened human. Strengths of character, as described by Peterson & Seligman (2004) in their foundational work on human flourishing, include d, e, and f, in addition to compassion and, as Seligman describes, the cardinal virtue of the pāramīs, the function of pāramīs, and the focus on interrelations, all in the service of moral development. In the Karaniya Mettā Sutta, the Buddha says, even as a mother at the risk of her own life watches over her son, her only son, so also with a boundless heart one should cherish all living beings (Sn I.8; Bodhi, 2017, pp. 179–180). This motherly care

for all is the ethical care of and for all and is humanism as interdependence.

The framework's relevance becomes clear when applied to various disciplines for human and ethical educational development. The 2022 report from UNESCO emphasizes the role of education in fostering understanding and empathy, as well as in helping to assume and sustain ethical global responsibilities in relation to crises. As Nussbaum (2011) argues, the interdependence of human dignity, feeling, and moral growth points to the need to teach the emotions of empathy and global responsibility. Buddhist humanism, Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) argues, when we look deeply into the suffering of others, we see our own suffering reflected there; to take care of them is to take care of ourselves (pp. 51–55).

As a matter of course, this research employs an integrative qualitative methodology, involving the analysis of both text and narratives, the analysis of both canonical and post-canonical literature, and present-day ethics, philosophy, peace studies, and educational theory. Analysis, framed in narrative ethics, foregrounds Buddhist literature's depiction of lived human experience as the bedrock of a pedagogy of hope and promise responsive to the crises of our times. Rather than treating the dhamma as an abstraction of metaphysical constructs, this perspective shifts to the practical and existential ramifications for individuals and societies in the quagmire of suffering, fear, and a precarious state of the world. This integrative method illustrates the scope of Buddhist humanism for responding to the world's enduring and intractable challenges of peace, social harmony, sustainable development, and a nurturing, healthy civic disposition.

Hence, this article focuses on the narrative of the Buddha's life and how he moved from existential fragility to universal liberation. This provides a basis for a model of humanistic education anchored in moral transformation, empathetic leadership, and collective responsibility. Buddhist philosophy of human flourishing is the ideal pedagogy of transformational wisdom. It ethically prescribes civilizational practices for a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

Objectives Of The Article

This paper strives to achieve three objectives. First, to illustrate the humane values embedded in the Buddhist literature and the historical representation of the Buddha, anger, and the suffering (dukkha), and the journey towards liberation (nibbāna) as the ethical foundation of Buddhist humanism. As Harvey (2000) puts it, the starting point of the Buddha's teaching is the reality of suffering and the moral duty to transform it, and not to run away from it (Harvey, 2000, pp. 14–17). The second objective of this article is to analyze the narrative and moral dimensions of the life of the Buddha and how they provide a powerful alternative paradigm to the human flourishing discourse, which is not confined to the individual, collective, or social binaries. Keown (1992) notes that Buddhist ethics is final and towards the completion and perfection of the human spirit, which says that the moral development of Buddhism benefits both oneself and others (Keown, 1992, pp. 231-232). This means that the life of the Buddha is a model of ethical development that harmonizes personal change and social transformation.

The article suggests that the values in the Buddhists' life narratives depict a pathway that fosters morally resilient people and compassionate societies prepared to meet the challenges the world is facing today. Recent studies on engaged Buddhism also support this. Queen and King (1996) state that genuine Buddhist compassion requires a confrontation with structural injustice and suffering, thus pushing the boundaries of transcendent spirituality to include a form of trauma activism and ethical advocacy. In the same line, Nussbaum (2011) states that to achieve human flourishing and global justice, there is a need to have and advocate the psychological, moral, and ethical dimensions of compassion, care, and dignity, to which Buddhist teachings also speak. Thus, this article attempts to explain the relevance and immediacy of Buddhist humanism in the context of contemporary violence, human and resource inequalities, environmental degradation, and social disintegration.

Approaching Buddhist texts with a humanistic lens allows the study to be part of the developing academic tradition that seeks to blend religious ethics and narrative wisdom with interdisciplinary concerns about the future of education, global governance, and the survival of the planet. The UNESCO documents, especially the one entitled Reimagining Our Futures Together, integrating virtue ethics, social responsibility and global citizenship, describe the fusion of these elements as the foundations for the

construction of pillars for empathy, ecosystemic balance, and flourishing of all life together (UNESCO, 2021/2022, pp. 14–18). The case of the Buddha and particularly the depth of universal moral imagination contained in his life, is a source of wisdom, and a living resource for the historical and flourishing of life and justice. Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that to take care of others is to take care of ourselves. This embodies the liberative act of caring for others in the context of intertwined moral responsibility and compassionate social embedding (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998, pp. 86–88).

Thus, the repositioning of the Buddha's narrative, as we hope to achieve, will be of interest as a source of contemporary global ethics and education for transformation towards a more compassionate, peaceful, and sustainable civilization. The following will:

1. Determine the ethical dimensions of the life narrative of the Buddha.
2. Analyze the cultivation of the Ten Pāramīs as a structure of humanistic virtue ethics; and
3. Consider the implications of Buddhist humanism for present-day education and society.

II. HUMAN SUFFERING AS THE STARTING POINT OF BUDDHIST HUMANISM

The existential beginning, the roots of Buddhist humanism, is the suffering of the human condition. One is not met with abstract relativism or the creation of false gods; the Buddhist perspective is born of the tangible and real fragility of human life. The First Noble Truth (dukkha ariyasacca) states that suffering is the condition of all life, it is the reality of our existence, it is the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death, it is the pain of being with that which you do not love, and the pain of separation from that which you do love. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, the Buddha states, Birth is suffering. Aging is suffering. Illness is suffering. Death is suffering. Association with the unloved is suffering. Separation from the loved is suffering (SN 56.11; Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1843–1847). The negation of the universality of dukkha yields the foundational Buddhist ethics. There is a fissure in the fabric of our shared existence. There is suffering, nothing more and nothing less. There is collaborative, shared suffering. It is this suffering that Harvey (2000) describes: As the Buddha's ethical vision, it begins with the immediacy of human suffering and the need to understand its causes rather than evade it (Harvey, 2000, pp. 1–6). The suffering of humanity is the foundation of compassion (karuṇā) and is the catalyst for change.

The story of Prince Siddhattha illustrates this point of entry into humanism. The Four Sights encounters with aging, illness, and death, plus the sight of the renunciant, confronted Siddhattha with the challenges of the human condition and shattered the delusion of worldly security and privilege. Such encounters portray the egalitarian aspect of Buddhist humanism. Suffering is a great equalizer, regardless of position, whether that is caste, class, gender, affluence, or one of the many divisions that permeate the social hierarchy. Siddhattha's renunciation was not a track out of responsibility; it was the refusal to regard suffering as an inevitable aspect of existence. Keown (1992) points out that for Buddhism, teleological is much more appropriate than deontological, as it focuses on the fulfillment and perfection of human nature (pp. 231–232), meaning that for Buddhism, liberation is an ethical issue.

The First Noble Truth is not a pessimistic death sentence; it is a call to inquiry and change. Buddhism maintains that the approach taken must always be direct and toward suffering, never away from it and never numbed with distractions and denial. It is suffering that is the only door, which, when fully understood, opens the possibility of freedom. In this way, Buddhist Philosophy is the antithesis of the present culture, which promotes the avoidance of suffering, leading to distractions and numbing acts, such as binge consumption, recreational distractions, or suppression of affect. Buddhist humanism recognizes suffering as an instance where ethical reflection (the wisdom of insight, or paññā) and concern for the welfare of others (love, or karuṇā) come from an immersion in the human condition.

The Buddha's teachings emphasize the importance of direct, transformative experiences. Experiences like these are also found in accounts of understanding the Four Noble Truths and personal liberation (SN 56.11). In the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), the understanding of anicca, dukkha, and anattā, and how it helps in the breakdown of identity-affirming attachments and the conditioned nature of phenomena, is explained. Udāna 1.10 quotes the Buddha stating, there is, monks, an unborn, unbecome, unmade,

unconditioned (Ud 1.10; Ireland, 2007, pp. 19–21). The Buddha affirms that the transcending of suffering is possible because unconditioned realities do exist. The texts illustrate the importance of wisdom stemming from lived experience, rather than from theory.

Transformational suffering originates from delusion and negates self-centered identity and awakens universal responsibility. Queen and King (1996) suggest that genuine, and perhaps the most fundamental form of Buddhist compassion, must address not only the individual anguish, but the structural manifestations of suffering (Queen & King, 1996, pp. 1–4). Here, social change is seen as connected to inner freedom. Considering Buddhist humanism, the resignation to suffering is, on one hand, not suffering. On the other hand, violence is not the cause of suffering. Suffering, with the active pursuit of clarity and compassion, justifies Buddhist humanism. Constraining suffering within the individual is a form of Buddhist literature that promotes a radically new perspective. The relational otherness is anthropological; to be fully awakened is to be awakened for and with others.

This mentions a developing point of interest that aids in the development of both ethics and the teaching of such in current times. The world is in turmoil: Inequity, social fragmentation, mental health issues, and the fragile state of the planet. The Buddhist concept of suffering provides us with a 'construct' that addresses psychological pain with responsibility. In democratic societies, emotional and moral education is imperative; Nussbaum (2011) states that responsibility, compassion, and dignity are essential to global citizenship (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 1–3, 17–19). The UNESCO document (2022) addresses global uncertainty with the teaching of empathy, and the educational focus on ethics and the teaching of solidarity (UNESCO, 2022, pp. 6–19). The Buddhist teaching of suffering as the ethical teacher to the wisdom of moral development is the most relevant. The Four Noble Truths teach that suffering is not to be fought, but is an invaluable means to achieve freedom. The narratives in Buddhist literature clearly present the philosophical basis of Buddhist teaching, which is a global, relational, and actionable humanism that starts from the acknowledgment of our shared fragility and ends with the radical compassion to transform. The suffering of humanity is not an obstruction; it is a pathway that leads us to liberation and the full achievement of our potential.

III. THE LIFE OF THE BUDDHA AS A NARRATIVE OF HUMAN LIBERATION

Buddhist humanism is fundamentally concerned with the suffering of the human condition. However, the Buddha's biography exemplifies a human story of liberation by transcending suffering to achieve wisdom and compassion. The story of the Buddha, kept through the canon and fashioned through the later narrative traditions, is more than just a mere collection of miraculous hagiographies. It is a resounding story of a human struggle with the many intricacies of hagiographies. This is the story of a man who pursued an unparalleled quest to define for himself the boundary of suffering and the limitless possibilities of one's personal experience. This story aligns Buddha's spirit with the universal code of ethical transformation and liberation. His story is one of countless moral tales of liberation. Keown notes that the moral codes of Buddhism are not aimed at a blind obedience to the doctrine, but at the fulfillment and perfection of human nature (Keown, 1992, pp. 231–232). Therefore, one of the most critical aspects of the biography of the Buddha is that it is an account of a human undergoing an extraordinary moral struggle, not merely the description of a closed doctrine.

The ascetic practices before the enlightenment highlight the empirical and experiential dimensions of the path of the Buddha. After Siddhattha gave up his royal status, he practiced for six years extreme forms of self-denial, almost to the point of death. Yet, through this, he realized that no amount of self-indulgence or self-mortification leads to the dissolution of suffering, as both extremes keep one bound in suffering. This awakening would elicit the discovery of the Middle Way (majjhimā paṭipadā) and of the dualistic extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification to the extremes of both self-discipline and compassion. In his first sermon, the Buddha proclaims this principle and states that the Middle Way is the path that gives rise to vision, gives rise to knowledge, and leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna (SN 56.11; Bodhi, 2000, pp. 1843–1847). This insight would become the focal point of Buddhist humanism, that liberation is not about the death of the body or the mind but the

intelligent engagement with the reality of existence, embodiment.

The enlightenment under the Bodhi tree exemplifies a new beginning. Rather than look to the heavens and attribute an awakening to the divine, the suttas describe the awakening as the result of conscious and disciplined, structured practice and mental insight. In the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the understanding of suffering as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and lacking a permanent self, anicca, dukkha, and anattā, removes clinging to self as fixed and uncovers suffering and the path to the end of suffering (DN 22; Walshe, 1995, pp. 335–350). The fact that the world's suffering is caused by untransformed base emotions of greed, hatred, and delusion is something that the domain of Buddhism recognizes very well. In this sense, liberation is not attained by the experiential worldview of heavenly states, nor by divine interventions. Instead, freedom is achieved through the development of insight that understands and transcends the roots of suffering (Gethin, 1998, pp. 294, 346). Therefore, Bodhi is an awakening that is the result of a deep understanding of human suffering and the moral will to act. Harvey (2000) notes that the Buddha's awakening is depicted as the apex of someone's attainment, not the result of otherworldly favor (pp. 15–16). This illustrates the follower's conviction that every sentient being has the possibility of achieving liberation.

The first point at which the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma) may extend liberational insight from the individual to the collective is the articulation of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. The first sermon of the Buddha provides a transformative sense of morality and education, which, through the pillars of experiential learning, ethical learning, meditation, and compassion for all, offers a structure to the indivisible and collective nature of suffering. The Wheel is turned, therefore, from individual to collective awakening, for if suffering is a universal phenomenon, so too is its liberation. The same is true for the principle of freedom, suffering, as elucidated by Queen and King (1996), who note that Buddhist liberation must be understood not only inwardly but as a transformative engagement with the world's suffering (pp. 11–12).

The radical social engagements of the Buddha further detail the humanistic orientation of his life. His rejection of the social stratification of the caste system represents an ethical revolution. In AN 3.66, the Buddha states Not by birth is one noble; by deeds one is noble asserting an egalitarian view in which descendant lineage is of no consequence, and social value is a function of virtue (AN 3.66; Bodhi, 2012, pp. 283–286). This principle is also applicable in the Vasettha Sutta of the Suttanipāta, in which the Buddha argues that spiritual self-determination, which is also referred to as spiritual autonomy, is a consequence of one's birth or social class. These teachings combat systemic social domination by transcending ascribed social status with a claim of intrinsic value (Sn 1.7; Bodhi, 2017, pp. 174–179).

In addition, the founding of the Bhikkhunī Saṅgha stands out as one of the first institutional confirmations of the existence of gender equality in the historical record (Harvey, 2000, pp. 378–380). While the history is complex, the founding act suggests that women can achieve the same level of enlightenment as men. This, to many, is a historic moment in the history of global ethics as it exemplifies the Buddhist transcending of a patriarchal framework and expanding the moral community.

The unqualified extension of compassion, especially when it does not respect tribe, state, or nation, is yet another example of liberating Buddhist humanism. In the primary text of Buddhism, the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta, it is stated: "With a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings" (Sn I.8, v.149; Bodhi, 2017, p.180). Here, the word' mettā' refers to love and kindness, not to some kin or a group, but to the entire world. This shift of scope from patricentric loyalty to universal brotherhood is significant, especially in the current context of persistent fragmentation and violent conflicts.

The aspects examined denounce the life of the Buddha as a story of an outlandish, divine being, but rather see it as extreme human emancipation, one where the experience of suffering is changed into wisdom, and the transcended privilege is converted into purposeful service. The isolated self is transformed into a deeply relational, compassionate other. His life story exemplifies leadership, not based on the imposition of will or supernatural control, but in the profound, ethical, and genuinely caring for all. In this understanding of liberation, it is a given that it will be contextualized relationally, in the sense that one awakens not in the individual, but with, and as a result of, a suffering humanity.

The life of the Buddha is imbued with a profound potential for contemporary scholarship and global ethics. As the world suffers increased structural inequality, ideological polarization, and ecological collapse, the life of the Buddha exemplifies the radical re-imagining of the positive potential of humanity and the hope for the flourishing of all. The life of the Buddha contradicts the modern assumption that freedom equates with the individual or competition; for true freedom resides in the relational aspect of wise, compassionate, and steadfast moral reason. All the fundamental characteristics of a civilization that is sustainable and humane, for Nussbaum (2011), re-imagined the positive potential of the life of the Buddha and described the world as a place where human and climate suffering is no more, and where democracy and human dignity based on empathy and a global ethics of care exist (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 18–20, 95–97, 154–160).

IV. HUMANISTIC VALUES IN BUDDHIST MORAL AND ETHICAL TEACHINGS

The Buddha's life and activities teach that there is the possibility of converting human suffering into liberation. The moral and ethical teachings of Buddhism articulate the values and practices of human suffering and its transformation. These teachings emphasize practices that transform suffering in the everyday lives of people. Unlike the enforcement of a legalistic or doctrinal set of morals, the Buddhist system of ethics is rooted in the empathic moral interdependence and shared suffering of all beings (paṭiccasamuppāda). Buddhism establishes an empirically based and articulated continuum of moral development pathways to elicit human flourishing (eudaimonia). At the core of this phenomenon are the axiological humanistic constituents of Buddhist ethics and karuṇā, compassion, loving-kindness (mettā), equanimity (upekkhā), moral wisdom (paññā), ethics (sīla), and dāna, which is the practice of giving or generosity. These components provide a viable, holistic, and ethical framework for personal and social development. As Keown (1992) says, Buddhist ethics is teleological in form, leading to the perfection of human nature, to the benefit of the self and others (pp. 231–232).

1. Compassion as the Basis of Positive Action

Karuṇā is understood as the moral reaction to the problem of suffering, and the primary concern of Buddhist ethics. It's important to note that many of the ethical traditions start with hypotheticals or divine authority. At the same time, Buddhism is the only system that is justified in the empathy of suffering and the moral obligation to relieve that suffering. Compassion is not mere passive empathy or emotional sentiment. It is an active mover of moral awareness to moral agency. The Buddha speaks of compassion as a quality of freedom that removes all forms of hatred and ill will, and in the Karaniya Mettā Sutta, He says we should care for others, "like a mother for her only son who is her life" (Snp 1.8). It is for this reason that compassion is and should always be a fundamental tenet of Buddhist humanism that calls for the social and moral integration of people into a community of concern. In a similar fashion, recent works also point to compassion as being of value in peacebuilding, trauma rehabilitation, and citizenship in a global, diverse community (Anālayo, 2015).

2. Loving Kindness and the Growth of Human Solidarity

Mettā is the response to suffering by the extension of goodwill to all. It engenders a morally inclusive universe by disseminating empathy irrespective of caste, gender, race, nationality, or social standing. In the Karaniya Mettā Sutta, harmful, divisive intent is counteracted by empathetic, shared humanity and, in the end, the desire of all is that beings "live in happiness" and "without enmity or ill will" (Snp 1.8). Mettā offers a competitive and exclusive social structure alternative. It allows for coexistence rooted in dignity. In modern ethics, Mettā provides a basis for intercultural dialogue, conflict, and nonviolent social organization.

3. Equanimity as Radical Equality and Moral Clarity

People often mistake upekkhā for emotional apathy. In the realm of Buddhist ethics, however, it describes the ability to encounter the world with balance, impartiality, and non-discrimination. Upekkhā is an ethical rejection of the biases of attachment and aversion, allowing one to see others without distortion. Upekkhā is the ethical foundation of justice, equality, and fairness, recognizing the fact that all sentient beings are equally vulnerable to suffering and equally

wish to be free from it. The Buddha stated, not by birth is one noble, but by deeds (MN 93; Ñāṇamoli & Bodhi, 2009, p. 769), emphasizing that moral dignity stems from universal equality, an idea many argue is long overdue. In the global arena, equanimity is an antidote to ideological divides and emotional dysregulation, building perseverance and productive engagement.

4. Wisdom as Transformative Human Insight

Buddhist moral advancement involves the development of an understanding of consequents, formatively, the moral advancement of compassion and loving-kindness. Wisdom projects the morally neutral, impermanent, and lacking-a-self perspective on any phenomenon (anicca–dukkha–anattā) and thereby shatters ignorance and the illusion of an isolative self. This, in turn, equips a person with skills to comprehend the fundamental causes of suffering and act appropriately. The Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22) highlights, as a precursor to nibbāna, insight, a conjunction of the contemplative with the moral. Quite the opposite of abstract theoretical wisdom, it is practical, existential, a social praxis, and the fundamental source of the ethical and courageous leadership required in complex social situations.

5. Social Ethics and Collective Responsibility

While loving-kindness and wisdom focus on the inner self, sīla (ethical conduct) and dāna (generosity) focus on the self in relation to others and, in silo, families and institutions. The ethical commitments of non-violence, truthfulness, integrity, and non-exploitation, as a collective, are morally aligned with dāna, which creates a protective patch of social trust, upon which social harmony can be built. Dāna induces the ethos of giving, and the generous consumption of the psychosocial resources of time, attention, and care. A moral economy built on reciprocity and cooperation, rather than predatory capitalism, addresses the core of contemporary retrenchment in inequity, consumerism, systemic corruption, and social disintegration.

6. A Universal System of Humanistic Virtues

The reconciliation of the Pāramī values and the tenets of virtue ethics results in the formulation of a broad system of humanistic virtue ethics. These systems depict and articulate moral character's apex refinement and continuum. It illustrates the developmental frontier of humanism in Buddhism. Buddhist moral growth never occurs at the expense of others; it benefits both self and others (Keown 1992, 231-232). The pāramī system models a gradual, perfectionist, and constructive approach to a system of virtue characterized by the absence of simplicity, rules, and punitive ethics. It provides a universal lingua franca of ethics that promotes paradigm shifts and cultural metamorphosis positively and constructively, devoid of extreme and violent social ideology.

The collection of values posited by Buddhist ethics represents a system that is holistic and encompasses a web of all the interconnections that promote life. Through its values, Buddhism reinforces the symbiotic relationship that exists between one's moral responsibility and a structural formation of freedom from civil emancipation. It upholds that an individual's spiritual enlightenment must also embody the social dimension of activism focused on the articulation of structural justice. The moral system entrenched in the philosophy of Buddhism, oriented towards humanism in its fullest, gives the distressed contemporary world a pathway towards holistic peace, justice, and a sustainable way of cohabiting.

V. UNIVERSAL LIBERATION: WHAT LIES BEYOND INDIVIDUAL SALVATION

The individual dimension of nibbāna, or liberation, as part of Buddhist humanism, is an expression of the principle of universal liberation. It is a call to extend the individual dimension of liberation to a collective moral imperative. Whereas numerous religions or philosophies speak of salvation as a once-off individual accomplishment or a reward from the divine, the Buddhist view of liberation is a result of an understanding of the relational character of existence, or the principle of paṭiccasamuppāda. Since there is relational suffering (dukkha), there is also relational liberation. Hence, the path of awakening is directed toward the moral (ethical) change of the world in the plural, through the compassionate (karuṇā) and wise (paññā) ethically responsible acts toward all beings. Buddhist liberation, therefore, is deeply humanistic: to be liberated is to be liberated with others and for others (Harvey, 2000, pp. 219–221).

The historical Buddha exemplifies the first principle effectively. He did not stay in selfish disengagement

or treat liberation like a possession after attaining enlightenment. Instead, he re-entered the world out of concern for all beings. In the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11), he states he intends "to set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma" for those with little dust in their eyes. There is a shift from personal emancipation to a concern for the world. The More truth is meaningful to the degree that it liberates others and, in turn, dismisses the model of the spiritual elite, confirming that everyone has the possibility of an awakening. The Buddha's recurrent assertion, Not by birth is one noble, but by deeds (AN 3.66; Bodhi, 2012, pp. 283–286), in which he dismantles the systems of inherited dominance, declares spiritual democracy and the absence of a hierarchy in an ordained privilege.

The Saṅgha is the first institutional manifestation of this universalist principle. It is not merely a monastic order, but a moral community of community, order, discipline, and flourishing. Thus, in accountability and cooperation, the Saṅgha stands in contrast to individualistic, competitive, and early capitalist societies. It is the first positive global ethical citizenship community of dignity, solidarity, and non-violence. Liberation is a shared goal of the community and not the individual.

The most recent movements of Engaged Buddhism are inspired by the moral imperative of collective liberation and the application of Buddhist teachings to systemic injustice, structural violence, and the human rights and ecological crises. Thich Nhat Hanh, A. T. Ariyaratne, S. Sivaraksa, and the Dalai Lama believe that activism on political, social, and environmental fronts is a way to show compassion. Social healing requires activism, and Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) states that the suffering of others is our own suffering. This is how the movements of Engaged Buddhism broaden the scope of liberation, meditative practices, and the personal sphere to include social activism and the global political sphere (Queen & King, 1996).

Universal liberation also establishes the foundation for a planetary ethic rooted in ecological interdependence. The doctrine of dependent origination teaches that all forms of life are interdependent and mutually conditioned, meaning that the suffering one causes to others will in turn be felt by oneself. Contemporary scholars note that it is this insight that is relevant to the moral imperatives of the present world; the crises of climate collapse, war, inequality, and displacement are all manifestations of this interconnected suffering (Nussbaum, 2011; Dalai Lama, 1999). Buddhist humanism offers a philosophy of ethical cooperation, as opposed to competing for self-preservation, and suggests that liberation is inextricably linked to the healing of the social fabric and the restoration of the ecosystem.

Universal emancipation provides the possibility of a new civilizational ordering based on the principles of awakening and ethical interdependence. Given the extreme self and world fragmentation and self-exploitation, a self-annihilating perspective can be understood as evocative of a kind of Buddhism's universal call for liberation, which, at its core, pleads for a transformative flourishing of all. It focuses on the flourishing of each being as fundamentally dependent on the flourishing of all, and not merely on the attainment of self-centered goals or the accumulation of material wealth, but rather on one's internal and external congruence with self, others, and the natural world.

During the historical formation of Buddhist Humanism, one also notes the world phenomenon of Buddhist Humanism as a synthesis of Wisdom and Compassion. It does not constitute a withdrawal from the world, but a profound and transformative engagement. It does not accept passive resignation to suffering. It invites individuals and societies to radicalize and deepen compassion, justice, and steadfast commitment to peace. As the next section illustrates, this provides an inspiring ethics of hope and community for a sustainable future, turning the Wheel of Dhamma in ancient India and, once again, in the contemporary world and global civilization that is at a critical crossroads of crisis and possibility.

VI. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE WITH MODERN HUMANISM

The main pillars of modern secular humanism are closely related to the humanistic practices found in the Buddhist ethical and philosophical teachings. Due to this similarity, there is potential for collaboration across disciplines. Secular humanism is often defended through the disciplines of science, psychology, and modern sociology. In contrast, Buddhist humanism arises from the mystical inquiry into the spirit and the transformative power of the human spirit. Yet, through both lenses, the inherent

dignity of a person is acknowledged, as is the potential for a person to morally improve through experience. Both traditions also decline fatalism, authoritarian moralism, and the notion of a psychological resignation to suffering. Quite the contrary, all traditions emphasize moral self-improvement, social activism, and the strengthening of the compassionate will. Such a comparative perspective highlights the Buddhist humanist traditions and their significance for contemporary global ethics.

The founders of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, along with subsequent theorists, emphasise the human potential for growth and the attainment of self-actualisation, emotional maturity, and the ability to make meaning (Maslow, 1954/1970, pp. 153–173; Rogers, 1961, pp. 105–115). These theories oppose the reductionist views of human behaviour based on the pathology of the human psyche, mechanistic behaviourism, or biological determinism. The advocates of these theories emphasise empathy, authenticity, and unconditional positive regard, which are similar to the Buddhist principles of mettā (loving-kindness) and karuṇā (compassion). Both traditions assert that real and lasting change comes from the individual, and not from outside pressure. As Keown (1992) notes, the Buddhist approach to ethics is teleological, seeking to ensure the holistic well-being and flourishing of self and others (pp. 231–232), a concern also central to humanistic psychology.

Besides psychology, Buddhist humanism is intertwined with global ethical frameworks, especially with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship Education. Frameworks such as UNESCO, peacebuilding, intercultural understanding, caring for the Earth, and Buddhist humanism point to dignity, justice, and peace (UNESCO, 2020, pp. 20-25). These frameworks advocate ethical development as the cultivation of empathy, social engagement (or cooperation), and eco-awareness for the attainment of sustainable futures. Buddhist dependent origination (paṭiccasamuppāda) demonstrates an ontology of relations that is parallel with current frameworks of interdependence in the political, pedagogical, and ecological. While modern humanism conceptualizes interdependence as a function of democracy and rationalism, Buddhism derives interdependence from an existential vantage point: the wellness of each is conditioned by the wellness of all.

Moreover, Buddhist humanism deepens and even expands secular paradigms, in certain respects, because of the particular type of freedom it advocates. It reframes freedom not merely as autonomy, or lack of external constraints, but as liberation from internal forces such as greed, hatred, and delusion, which cause suffering and structural violence. In other words, true freedom is relational and ethical and transcends individuality. Furthermore, it is the presence of compassion and the lack of self-assertion that should be at the center of the moral life. This view critiques contemporary liberal humanism that promotes autonomy to the expense of community and ethical responsibility. Therefore, Buddhist humanism transforms the notion of freedom as an individual entitlement into a collective moral cause anchored on a relational ethical framework of responsibility and caring for one another.

Moreover, secular humanism and Buddhist humanism both promote and defend the dignity and rights of individuals. Still, the latter expands this moral geography into the radically trans-human and eco-ethics that recognize the self-organizing systems of interdependence, which all life forms demonstrate. Contrary to environmental ethics that prioritize pragmatic sustainability, Buddhism offers an existential basis for answering the question of why ecological balance is needed: to harm others is to harm oneself, and to care for the Earth is to care for life.

Engaged Buddhism exemplifies social action rooted in particular Buddhist tenets. Figures like Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, and A. T. Ariyaratne show that compassion is engagement with suffering, whether that is through advocacy for peace, community building, development, environment, and human rights (Queen & King, 1996). For Thích Nhất Hanh (1998), compassion is a verb that the spirituality within Buddhism is bonded with ethical action, and resonates with the transformative goals, as opposed to mere instances of empathy, of UNESCO’s GCED agenda. Hanh posits that talking about compassion is much less effective than doing compassion. On the one hand, Buddhism and secular humanism, and the scientific approaches within them, provide a valuable framework for social thought. These streams of social thought can be done with the dialogue of secular humanism, as far as Buddhism can provide ethical

depth and philosophy, and modern humanism can offer operational frameworks to practical implementations of transformative practices. These streams of thought reveal the envisioned ideal world, where humans do not dominate or compete with one another, but cooperate and exercise justice and care. They also share the position that mere technological advancement does not address the world's problems and crises; it is the ethical and spiritual advancement that is important. These streams of thought form a partnership that is needed to address issues like climate change, social fragmentation, and global inequality, but also ethically urgent work like the relational alleviation of these social issues.

Therefore, the Buddhist and modern humanist comparison reveal an integrated and relational perspective of human flourishing, a model of interconnected liberation, and individual inner shift and social outer shift collective responsibility. This integrated perspective offers a significant philosophical contribution to the emerging global ethics, peace education, and sustainable civilization.

VII. CONCLUSION

The historical Buddha's life can be seen as an example of a story of complete transformation of a human being, from one who has gone through existential suffering to one who is free from suffering in all of its forms. From a proper engagement with the fragility and impermanence of life, the Buddha teaches that suffering is not something to be escaped or endured, but that it can serve as an impetus for the development of ethics and social transformation. By rising to suffering and not shying away from it, the Buddha taught that from a state of pain, one can give rise to wisdom (paññā), and from a state of vulnerability, one can give rise to (karuṇā) integrated compassion, and from a state of oppression, one can achieve a positive state of freedom. The enlightenment under the Bodhi tree symbolized a transcending of ignorance, a realization of a state of humanity, a state of interdependence (paṭiccasamuppāda) inclusive of all beings, and the relinquishing of all forms of egocentric, insular, and suffocating attachments (DN 22; SN 56.11).

Buddhist literature describes an example of a humanistic vision through a framework of compassion, loving-kindness (mettā), equanimity (upekkhā), generosity (dāna), and moral discipline (sīla), and then, the ten pāramīs. For example, Keown (1992) describes the example of Buddhist ethics and why it is considered a teleological ethics. It focuses on the end purpose of the moral character and the moral actions of a person to achieve the benefit of self and strengthen the community (pp. 231–232). The moral character and the moral actions of the person are the ethics. It is a practical and relational approach to cultivate an awakened humanity (Harvey, 2000). This illustrates that the ethics of Buddhism are not simply abstract theories. The ethics of Buddhism present a plan or a path to follow.

Buddhist Humanism illustrates the role of the dhamma, which focuses on the creation of a compassionate and wise civilization, as the end goal of the Buddhist teaching is to end suffering (dukkha). The end of suffering is not a personal goal; it is a collective goal and an ethical responsibility that the community must uphold and care for. It is about the conscience of the community. The moral and ethical conscience must be focused on the end of suffering, and transformation is the new vision. Transformation is not through harmful or violent means. Transformation is about the conscience of the community. It is about the community and conscience working together in order to deliver on the vision of the community.

Today, this perspective rings especially relevant. The current age of socio-economic and political inequality, ideological bifurcation, ecological destruction, and psychosocial crises is devastating. Buddhist Humanism offers a practical framework for remaking the moral basis of world civilization. It provides a counter-violent and indifferent social compassion as a force. The principle of interdependence serves as a positive moral guide to peace, ecological sustainability, and social and global justice. Compassion, as one of the principal tenets, must and is being enacted through social change, community building, and ecological preservation the world over and among engaged Buddhist leaders like Thich Nhat Hanh (1998), the Dalai Lama (1999), and Sulak Sivaraksa. The integration of structural change with inner transformation is consistent with UNESCO's (2020) articulated vision for global citizenship, peace education, and sustainability.

Deepening the dialogue between Buddhist Humanism and contemporary frameworks like The Capabilities

Approach (Nussbaum, 2011), ecological ethics, trauma-sensitive education, and global governance is the direction future research focus ought to take. Such efforts demonstrate how the ethics of Buddhism may be of practical and philosophical relevance to assist humanity through the crises it faces.

The life of the Buddha embodies the most radical optimism about what the human being is capable of: that freedom is attainable, that suffering is not an inevitability, and that an ethical awakening is the most potent resource for the renewal of civilization. A blueprint for the construction of the world is called for that is based on compassion and wisdom. This is not a theoretical exercise; it is a matter of great urgency. Adopting this worldview, humanity is able to reclaim its foothold on the possibilities of peace, justice, and ecological equilibrium and proceed towards a reality in which all beings live and thrive with dignity and freedom.

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