

# **Buddhism: a Religion of Positivism or Presentism?**

## **A Study of Bhaddhekaretta Sutta**

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### **Introduction:**

The question of ‘the **present moment**’ is a difficult one to address: how can all sentient beings experience ‘now’ at the same time? This question is of particular interest to anyone who practices meditation. This problem may be formulated in a philosophical framework: is Buddhism ‘positivism’ or ‘presentism’?

Some scholars interpret Buddhism as a form of ‘positivism’, whereas others describe it as ‘presentism’. Positivism is a strong form of empiricism. It rejects metaphysics and theologies because they seek knowledge that is beyond experience, and holds that experiment and observation are the only possible sources of knowledge.’<sup>1</sup>

Presentism, on the other hand, is the belief that only the present exists and that the future and the past are unreal. Stcherbatsky, for instance, says: “Only the present, the ‘here’, the ‘now’, the ‘this’ are real. Everything past is unreal, everything future is unreal, everything imagined, absent, mental, notional, every Universal, whether a concentrative Universal or an abstract one, is unreal. All arrangements and all relations, if considered apart from the terms related, are unreal. Ultimately the only reality is the present moment of physical efficiency.’<sup>2</sup> Besides, the Buddha, who emphasizes the present moment in his teaching, also says that:

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<sup>1</sup> *Collins English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Harper Collins Publishers, 1998), P. 702.

<sup>2</sup> Stcherbatsky, TH., *Buddhist logic*, Vol. I, Leningrad, 1932, Pp. 69-70.

*“Let not a person revive the past  
Or on the future build his hopes,  
For the past has been left behind  
And the future has not been reached”.*

Does this suggest that the Buddha accepts only the present but absolutely denies the past and the future? In order to consider this important issue, it is necessary to consider if Buddhism is positivism or presentism; or both; or neither of them. In so doing, I will limit my discussion to the Bhaddhekaratta Sutta of the Majjhima-Nikāya.

### **The Significance of the Present Moment**

Somdej Phra Nansangvara, Supreme Patriarch of Thailand, says that “the present moment is very important for meditation practitioners; they must strive to find the present moment. Otherwise, concentration (samādhi) cannot arise, because emotions [laced through the perception] of either the past or the future will cloud the present moment”<sup>3</sup> So, in meditation it is necessary to overcome emotion linked to the past and future, and to concentrate only on the present.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Buddha himself has instructed that people who understand the present Dhamma do not tremble and are not shaken over things that arise inside and outside their minds, but are able to practice and live according to it.<sup>5</sup> So, here the Buddha states that one should not chase after the past or place expectation on the future. What is past is left behind and the future is as yet to come. Whatever quality is present one clearly sees right there.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Buddha intends us to lay down the past and future, and focus on

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<sup>3</sup> Somdej Phra Nansangvara in (30 June 2549) in <http://www.mahayana.in.th/tsavok/tape/071.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Phra Photiyanathera (Cha Suphattho), Present moment, (Bangkok: V.S.general, 2543).

<sup>5</sup> Ma.U. (Thai) 14/27/410.

<sup>6</sup> Ma.U. (Thai) 14/272/510.

the present moment, particularly by concentrating on our own senses: seeing, hearing, taste, touch, smell, or body and mind <sup>7</sup>, until we pass away. <sup>8</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh, the author of an acclaimed work, *Peace in Every Step*, and *The Miracle of Mindfulness* - also describes “Buddhism is a religion of the present moment” - the happiness that we can touch is very near our mind, in particular, if we focus on our mind during walking, standing, lying and sitting. Also, we should see all things as they are, for example, breathing in, breathing out and moving our body. While we do meditation, we do not have questions about why we have to do it or what kind of things we will obtain and achieve through meditation. By this method, every person who does meditation will have happiness with every breathing in or out.” <sup>9</sup>

However, Phra Dhammapitaka [P.A. Payutta], a well-known Thai scholar-monk is of the opinion that living at the present moment does not exclude the past nor the future. The question of time is in fact psychologically-rooted. This is to say that what is problematic here is neither the past nor the future but rather the attachment (*tanha*) to the past and the future as well as lack of wisdom (*paññā*). He suggests:

“The nature of the thought of either the past or the future is, to put it briefly, the thought that is derived from clinging; it is born of attachment; it is managed by emotions that it seeks delight in things already past. Because the mind is still fixated with the past, hanging over or lives in dreams with no grounding in reality whatsoever. This is all due to being discontent with the present experience and is therefore an attempt to run away from the present. The present thought is, on the other hand, is guided by understanding and is empowered by wisdom. When a thought arises this way, no matter whether one thinks about the present, the past or the future, one

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<sup>7</sup> Tee.Ma. (Thai) 10/105/372.

<sup>8</sup> Khu.iti. (Thai) 25/28/375.

<sup>9</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Waking: The Way of Mindfulness* (Bangkok: Rurnkeaw, 2543), p.4.

is still considered to be thinking at the present moment according to the teaching of the Buddha. This is applicable to the exercise of the mind in moment to moment in daily life as much as in reflecting on the past in order to learn a lesson or in pondering about the future in order to prepare for days ahead. Indeed, this principle applies to the realization of the dhamma by ordinary people as well by the Buddha who through the process comes to achieve “the knowledge of past lives” (*pubbe-nivasanussatinyana*), “the knowledge of the past” (*atita-nyana*) and “the knowledge of the future” (*anagatamsa-nyana*).<sup>10</sup>

So, the present moment has two significances: (1) in terms of quality of mind, it will prevent the mind from wandering according to the Buddha, who said that what is past is left behind. The future is as yet unreached. Whatever quality is present you clearly see right there, right then.<sup>11</sup> [11] (2) In terms of perception, it will protect us from thinking of the past, which has gone already, and the future, which we wish for in our life.

People who practice meditation should be enabled to see everything as it is, but it is very difficult to develop mindfulness and achieve happiness, as human perception cannot understand everything as it is.

To sum up, from the Buddhist perspective, ‘Buddhism is a religion of the present moment’. That is, for meditation, Buddha’s teaching focuses on the present moment and true feelings that arise in every step. In order for human beings to develop, in both work and meditation, it is very important that they concentrate on every step: thinking, working, eating, speaking and lying down.

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<sup>10</sup> PhraDhammapitaka, *Buddhadhamm*, (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University 2546), p.703.

<sup>11</sup> Ma.U. (Thai) 14/272/510.

## Present Moment in Bhaddhekaratta Sutta - A Single Excellent Night

Before considering the reasons why the Buddha recommends the present time to us in this sutta, we need read one important passage from the sutta. The Buddha said:

*'Let not a person revive<sup>12</sup> the past<sup>13</sup>  
Or on the future build his hopes,  
For the past has been left behind  
And the future has not been reached  
Instead, with insight let him see Each presently arisen state  
Let him know that and be sure of it Invincibly, unshakably.  
Today the effort must be made;  
Tomorrow Death may come, who knows?  
No bargain with Mortality  
Can keep him and his hordes away  
But one who dwells thus ardently, Relentlessly, by day, by night-  
It is he, the peaceful Sage has said,  
Who has had a single excellent night.'<sup>14</sup>*

That is, One Who Has Had a Single Excellent Night, because his every minute focused on breathing in or breathing out and seeing everything as it is.

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<sup>12</sup> Not..revive' in this case, it means 'do not want five Aggregates under desire and delusion. (Ma.au.a. 7/272/174)

<sup>13</sup> The past' in this case, is means 'Five Aggregates: material, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness'. (Ma.au.a. 72722/174)

<sup>14</sup> The Middle length Discourses of the Buddha, Translated from the Pāli by Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, (Oxford: The Pāli Text Society, 2001) 1039.

## **What is the Single Excellent Night?**

According to Atthakathajhan, ‘One Who Has Had a Single Excellent Night’ is ‘One who only takes time to practice meditation all night’<sup>15</sup> Especially in this case, the Buddha points out that by being mindful of this dual process as it really is, we are able to rightly understand its intrinsic nature. When we want to understand something as it really is, we should observe it, watch it, and be mindful of how it really occurs - without analyzing it, without logical reasoning, without philosophical thinking. We should be very attentive and mindful of it as it really is. When our body feels hot, we should note that feeling of heat as heat. When the body feels cold, we should note it as cold. When we feel pain, we should note it as pain. When we feel happy, we should note that happiness. When we feel angry, we should note that anger and when we feel sorrow, we should be mindful of it as sorrow. When we feel sad or disappointed, we should be aware of our emotional state of sadness or disappointment as it is.<sup>16</sup>

## **Is Buddhism Positivist or Presentist?**

From the above discussion, from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism is definitely not a form of ‘positivism’. Even though he does speak about the importance of the present moment, this does not mean that the Buddha denies the past and the future. In the same context, he mentions mindfulness and carefulness again and again. The significance of these is that he teaches his followers to think of the future by applying the understanding of wrong things in the past to improve themselves. Conversely, some scholars have tried to interpret the Buddha’s work as a form of ‘presentism’. I do not accept this interpretation, although I agree that the past and the future is unreal, and the only reality is the present moment. The Buddha emphasizes the present moment in the following words:

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<sup>15</sup> M.AU.A.7/272/174

<sup>16</sup> Nyanaponika, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, (Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 2005), 33-46.

*‘Instead with insight let him see  
Each presently arisen state  
Let him know that and be sure of it  
Invincibly, unshakably’.*

Here, he is telling somebody who practices meditation to focus on the five aggregates as they are, for example, when we feel pain, we understand it as pain; when the mental is wandering, we understand it as wandering. If we can understand it like this, it is very useful and effective for the practice of meditation. Moreover, positivist scholars might suggest that the Buddha is a positivist as well, because his teaching places great emphasis on the present moment, and also he seems to the past and future. In my opinion, this interpretation the Buddha’s teaching is very narrow, because, this sutta has another context that we should consider:

*‘Today the effort must be made;  
Tomorrow Death may come, who knows?  
No bargain with Mortality  
Can keep him and his hordes away’*

According to these passage, the Buddha does not deny the future at all but notes that, in practice, we have to be aware of it all the time, because we do not know whether tomorrow or the day after tomorrow we will die. Thus, we should be careful, and also have mindfulness all the time, such as, when speaking, walking, driving, meditating and working. The Buddha said somebody who lives without mindfulness is like a dead person. Thus, in this case, he strongly recommends that ‘one [should] dwell thus ardently, relentlessly, by day, by night’. With these words, the Buddha wants to remind everybody to concentrate on the here and now by persevering ardently and relentlessly, day and night. At the very least, this gives us confidence about living the next minute, the next hour, the next month and the next year.

To sum up, from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism is absolutely not the same as positivism, even in the apparently similar case of focusing on

the present moment. So, not only does it makes meditators happy and calm, but it also leads to peace, mindfulness and carefulness for people who understand everything as it is.

### **Summary - The Significance of the Present Moment:**

To sum up, from a Buddhist perspective, Buddhism is one of the religions that emphasize presentism, especially in the case of focusing on the present moment. On the one hand, it does not deny the past or the future, because these are very important for mindful living. On the other, there are two reasons why the present moment is very useful for people who concentrate or focus on it.

Meditation or Samādhi refers to our mind concentrating or focusing on one thing or one feeling at a time, and regarding it with the same attitude. In this case, the present moment is very important for somebody practicing meditation: (1) meditators would be able to understand feeling as it is, such as, wandering, pain, thought and anger. (2) meditators would be able to understand three characteristics: impermanence, suffering and selflessness clearly. For example, when we sit meditating for a long time, our legs may become very painful, and the reason for this pain is that our bodies are subject to impermanence and inability to remain static. Thus, all things must change all the time. In the case of pain, we cannot control our bodies or command them as we want. Suffering is a bodily duty but the duty of the mind is to concentrate on the suffering of the body. So, it is not possible for us to understand our material being as it is, if we do not understand the real meaning of the present moment, because the two things are inextricably related. This understanding is essential for those who need to meditate more effectively.

Daily life: The present moment has very useful applications for living daily life. The present moment consists of two important things: mindfulness and carefulness. Thus, we could apply it usefully in the case of '*conflict*' within families, among colleagues and in society. In today's world, there are many conflicts at work, within the family and in society. We can apply our

understanding of the present moment to managing conflict in order to live with each other peacefully. Conflict arises when two people or two groups want the same thing at the same time; conversely, in most cases, if the same thing is desired by more than one person or group at different times, conflict is unlikely to arise. Thus, 'conflict' can be defined as irreconcilable interests.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, from a Buddhist perspective, most conflict arises from desire, arrogance and delusion, all of which the Buddha counseled against, because they prevent clear thinking and impede effective social and professional relationships. When conflict arises within our group or family, our duty is not necessarily to avoid it, although sometimes avoiding it is one method of dealing with it. To begin with, we should understand it as it is, and also look for the best options for resolving it, such as, negotiation, mediation and compromise. In this case, somebody who understands the present moment should be able to mediate it in any difficult situation. Also, they should be able to live and work with other people at work, in society and within the family.

So, the most important thing in practicing meditation is to understand the present moment as it is. According to Bhikkhu Nanaponika said: "The heart of the present moment is 'mindfulness', meaning that our mind is not controlled by many passions, such as, desire, delusion, greed, lust and craving. In considering this issue, it is very important to understand that he was trying to suggest that we should keep our mind on the present moment without being interested in the past or future, in the case of practicing meditation."<sup>18</sup>

Also, our true happiness at work, within the family and in society is a result of understanding the present moment. So, the heart of the matter is right mindfulness. At the same time, the present moment and mindfulness

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<sup>17</sup> See in Hansa Nithibuyakorn, 'Buddhist Conflict Management', (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya, 2548).

<sup>18</sup> Bhikkhu Nanaponika, The heart of meditation, (Bangkok: Siam, 2538), p.23.

are the same thing. It is impossible to separate the two things from each other. Finally, all kinds of religions in the world arise because of this search. One great religion in the world is Buddhism. It leads people to the cessation of suffering.<sup>19</sup> [19] Everybody in the world wants happiness and peace. This is the reason why people seek the true path, leading them towards the cessation of suffering.

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<sup>19</sup> Sayadaw U Janakabhivamsa, *Vipassana Meditation*, (Yangon: Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Center), 1985.