

มโนทัศน์ว่าด้วยธรรมะในมุมมองของ ดร. บี อาร์ อัมเบ็ดการ์

ตามคัมภีร์พระพุทธศาสนา

A Concept of Dhamma in DR. B. R. Ambedkar's Viewpoint  
with Special Reference to Buddhist Scriptures

พระมหาพรชัย สิริวโร

Phramaha Pornchai Sirivaro<sup>๑</sup>

รุ่งนิภา เหลียง Rungnibha Liang<sup>๒</sup>

บทคัดย่อ

ในการพยายามอธิบายให้เห็นความแตกต่างระหว่างคำว่า ศาสนาและธรรมะ ดร. บี อาร์ อัมเบ็ดการ์ ยืนยันว่า พระพุทธเจ้าเอาคำว่า ธรรมะมาใช้ประโยชน์ เพราะคำนี้มีความหมายทางสังคม ในขณะที่คำว่า ศาสนาไม่มีความหมายทางสังคม ในเรื่องนี้ ธรรมะจึงมีคุณสมบัติที่แตกต่างจากศาสนา เพราะฉะนั้น ธรรมะจึงถือว่า มีคุณสมบัติที่จำเป็นสำหรับทุกๆสังคม ในขณะที่ศาสนา ไม่มีพื้นที่สำหรับสังคมเลย ด้วยข้อยืนยันที่กล่าวไว้แล้วนั้น บทความนี้ จึงมีเป้าหมายที่จะให้เหตุผลว่า คำว่า ธรรมะบางที่อาจจะเหมาะสมสำหรับสังคมในการประยุกต์ใช้ในชีวิต แต่ถ้ามองจาก มุมนรีรุกติศาสตร์ คำนี้มีความหมายหลายอย่าง ถ้าเป็นอย่างนั้น มโนทัศน์ว่าด้วยธรรมะจะไม่เหมาะสมในการประยุกต์ใช้ มีหลักฐานสองประการที่จะแสดงให้เห็นเพื่อสนับสนุนการใช้เหตุผลนี้ คือ ประการที่ ๑ ถ้ามองจากจารีต คำว่า ธรรมะ อาจจะหมายถึง ศาสนา กฎ/การใช้/การปฏิบัติ ธรรมชาติ/คุณสมบัติที่จำเป็น ลักษณะคุณสมบัติ ความถูกต้อง ความยุติธรรม ศีลธรรม เป็นต้น และประการที่ ๒ ถึงแม้ว่าจะมีบางครั้งที่พระพุทธเจ้าเอาคำว่า ธรรมะมาใช้ประโยชน์เพื่อป้องกันการกระทำที่ผิด แต่ก็มีบางครั้งเหมือนกันที่พระพุทธเจ้าใช้คำว่า ธรรมะเพื่อปกป้องถึงกิเลสด้วย

**คำสำคัญ:** คำว่าธรรมะ, คำว่าศาสนา, ความหมายทางสังคม, ดร. บี อาร์ อัมเบ็ดการ์

---

<sup>๑</sup> ภาควิชาศาสนาและปรัชญา บัณฑิตวิทยาลัย มหาวิทยาลัยมหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย  
Department of Religion and Philosophy, Graduate School,

Mahachulalongkomrajavidyalaya University, Thailand

<sup>๒</sup> ภาควิชาศาสนาและปรัชญา คณะมนุษยศาสตร์และสังคมศาสตร์, มหาวิทยาลัยบูรพา  
Department of Religion and Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social

Sciences, Burapha University



## Abstract

While trying to differentiate the meaning between Religion and Dhamma, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar claimed that the Buddha made use of Dhamma because it contains social meaning, whereas Religion did not have it. In this matter, Dhamma is opposite to whatever quality Religion has. Therefore, Dhamma comes to gain the essential quality for every society while Religion has no room for any society. By virtue of the mentioned claim, in this article, an attempt was purposely made to argue that to some extent Dhamma may be suitable for every society in applying for living life but etymologically Dhamma in question also contains many meanings. If so, then, such a concept of Dhamma fails to be fit in the application. In order to support of this argument, two evidences are shown as follows: 1) traditionally the word Dhamma may refer to: religion, law/usage/ practice, nature/essential quality or characteristic property, right, justice, morality, etc., 2) although there were times the Buddha made use of Dhamma for the meaning of good action, yet, there also were times the Buddha means defilements in the form of Dhamma.

**Keywords:** Dhamma, Religion, Social Meaning, Ambedkar

### 1. Introduction

While trying to differentiate two concepts between Dhamma and Religion, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar clearly claimed that both concepts are totally different. On the one hand, the concept of Religion is not clear due to its infinite definition resulting in many meaning, furthermore, since it has been undergoing many stages, then its meaning thereby depending upon each successive stage. It by nature is not fixed because it sometime comes to be identified and somehow associated with the term of magic, beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, prayers and sacrifices

including superstition, it can be simply explained that the concept of Religion is inherently concerned with the Creator or God. On the other hand, the concept of Dhamma fundamentally differs from the former. As far as the concept of Dhamma is concerned, it, according to Dr. B. R Ambedkar's viewpoint, basically becomes social as diametrically opposed to the concept of Religion which embraces personal meaning being confined to only oneself. The concept of Dhamma by nature means the righteousness relating to the relationship of man in all spheres of



life. In this matter, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar went on to make a clear-cut claim that a man who lives alone needs no Dhamma at all.<sup>๑</sup> By virtue of this, it can be claimed that Dhamma is social and social is Dhamma; without society there will never be Dhamma, both co-exist essentially like a man and his shadow, where there is a man, his shadow is also there or like mind and property of mind, where there is mind, there is property of mind; mind cannot arise without its property, and its property cannot arise if there is not mind.

A question is asked as to why does Dhamma have to do everything with society. In answering this question, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar pointed out to the case where two men live together in society and in this situation both are somehow made to live together and then living together, if they really want to live happily, peacefully and even meaningfully, Dhamma must be followed. If so, a man who lives along somewhere needs no room for Dhamma. Suffice to say that according to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's view, where there is Dhamma, there is society or vice versa. It can be claimed that Dhamma inseparably means a lot to society and society means a lot to Dhamma. This clearly showed that society cannot be sustained by Religion; only

Dhamma can do this significant task. Based on this claim, Dhamma, according to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's view, plays inseparable role in sustaining human beings' society, but a single person is not required at all.

## 2. Discussion

At the outset, it seems that the concept of Dhamma plays a major role as well as the destination in building up society but later on when we follow the successive line of the discussion we find that Dhamma becomes essential because in society where Dhamma is properly observed by members, liberty can be expected to be enjoyable with; in this way such liberty is automatically derived from Dhamma, it may not be possible to claim that the mentioned liberty can give rise to Dhamma, we can only claim that if we need liberty then we should go and find from society where Dhamma is followed and that is why society needs to choose Dhamma in order to pave the way of liberty, otherwise anarchy and dictatorship would be bringing in.

However, so far as the word 'Dhamma' is concerned, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar still went on explaining about its significant aspects as to why did it become so special and necessary. Further explanation on this had been given that the reason why is Dhamma necessary and essential because Dhamma in

---

<sup>๑</sup> B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, (Nagpur: Buddha Bhoomi Publication, 1997), p.316.

question consists in two chief concepts, Prajna and Karuna,<sup>๔</sup> these two words were used by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He had made a considerable claim that Prajna basically means understanding becoming one of the two cornerstones of the Buddha's Dhamma and under this concept there will be no any room for superstition. As regards Karuna, it basically means love and under this concept, society can potentially grow without harm and this also becomes the cornerstone of the Buddha's Dhamma. By virtue of these, Dhamma markedly hold a special room for all society according to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's viewpoint.

Now the true concept of Dhamma emerges by virtue of the above two concepts: Prajna and Karuna and under these two concepts there is no room for the concept of religion as was said early by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar or, in other words, the concept of Religion has no room Prajna (wisdom) and Karuna (compassion). Viewed from this angle, the chief demarcation between the concept of Religion and Dhamma is clearly made.

When the clear-cut definition of the two concepts, Religion and Dhamma was clearly shown then he went on to discuss in great details the purpose of both concepts in

order to lay great emphasis on what is actually called Religion and Dhamma. In order to do this he put four kinds of question as follows: what is the purpose of religion? What is the purpose of Dhamma? Are they one and the same? Or are they different? Why did he put such questions? It seemed that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar came to understand the fact that what is true to such definition needs a practicable verification from one's experience; otherwise it would become unfruitful while applying in daily life. In support of what already claimed, he, then, introduced readers to the story of mystic wonderer and the origin of things in Pāṭika Sutta<sup>๕</sup> and the story of the soul theory in Poṭṭhapāda Sutta.<sup>๖</sup> In the first story, the discussion on the subject matter of miracle was narrated when Sunakkhatta of the Licchavis made a great attempt to persuade the Buddha to show him superpower of man by reasoning that if the Buddha did not provide him mystic wonders, he would leave the Order.

In replying this, the Buddha reminded him if He ever promised Sunakkhatta in that way. In short, it can be said that this story is mainly concerned with marvelous actions and it seems so obvious that the

---

<sup>๔</sup> **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. 3, tr., by T. W. and C. A. F., (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2001), pp. 7-32.

<sup>๖</sup> **Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. 1, tr., by T. W. Rhys Davids, (Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2001), pp. 244-264.

---

<sup>๔</sup> Ibid., p. 317.



Buddha tried to avoid talking about such a kind of miracle but somehow proving it through His discussion. By virtue of this, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar concluded the mentioned story that while the religion is referring the beginning of things, the Dhamma is opposite. It can be further reasoned by taking what appears in the aforesaid story into account that if the Buddha complied with Sunakkhatta's request then it would turn out to be a type of religious practice. According to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's explanation, the manner Sunakkhatta was being treated by the Buddha becomes a true matter of Dhamma. In the second story, it was pointed to metaphysical questions asked by Potthapāda: is the world not eternal? Is the world finite? Is the world infinite? There was no any reply given by the Buddha regarding these questions. When asked why did He not reply to them? The Buddha clearly said that these questions are not calculated to profit, more importantly, they are not concerned with the Dhamma leading to the right conduct; it can be claimed that under these questions, the detachment, purification of one's mind, quietude, tranquilization of heart, real knowledge, and spiritual progress in highest stage will not be able to be expected for. Here, then, trying to explain the origin of the world is a matter of religion, in other words, the kinds of metaphysical question

as such are of religion's practical purposes, not Dhamma's at all.

It has been already explained that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar made use of the concept of Dhamma here to support what was called 'social dimension' because only Dhamma can become the essential fabric for sustaining the whole society according to his opinion, whereas the concept of religion cannot fulfill such a role. Now, a question is asked as to how is the Dhamma. To have the full senses of the Dhamma, its definition is required.

#### Definition of Dharma or Dhamma

When it comes to dictionary, the word 'Dharma' comes from the root '*dhṛ*' 'to uphold, to establish, to support' then it etymologically refers to righteousness, merit, religious duty, religious law, a goal of life, medium of motion, scriptural texts, quality, cause, religious teaching, unsubstantial and soulless. As regards Buddhism, such word is defined in terms of cosmic law, the natural law, the teachings of the Buddha, norms of conduct, things or facts, ideas, and factors of existence.<sup>๑</sup> Considering the given definition may be impossible to conclude the exact meaning of it.

---

<sup>๑</sup> John Grimes, **A Concise of Dictionary of Indian Philosophy**, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 112-113.

In Encyclopedia of Buddhism,<sup>๔</sup> the word Dharma/dharmas (Dhamma) is regarded as the fundamental concept and it embraces two chief types of meanings: 1) it basically refers to the Buddha's teachings or Law; usually this sense is concerned with the Buddha's Dharma and 2) it means a constituent of nature; this sense is concerned with the conditioned dharmas of existence. Here there are two types of meaning that the concept of Dhamma can be categorized, but it seems that the definition of Dhamma embraces more than one specific or two specific possible meanings.

In Pāli-English Dictionary,<sup>๕</sup> the word Dhamma comes from the root '*dhri*' meaning 'to hold, to support', this forms a foundation and upholds. It is further defined that this word can be concerned with: 1) GUṆE, what can be applied to good conducts; 2) DESANĀYAM, to preaching and moral instruction; 3) PARIYATTIYAM referring to 9 fold collections of the Buddha's scriptures; 4) NISSATTE referring to cosmic law. In this dictionary, it

was found that there are four categories of the word Dhamma it actually tries to refer to. Of these, somehow, it by nature creates the room for a disputable conclusion wherein an open choice of meaning still exists.

With respect to the word Dhamma, if the root '*dhri*' is taken into a critical account, it is mentioned in another Encyclopedia<sup>๖</sup> that such a term contains a complexity and multifaceted term in Hindu tradition. It can be also defined in terms of religious law, right conduct, duty, and social order. In this volume of Encyclopedia, the aforesaid word has a social concept derived from the Vedic notion of 'RITA' or 'cosmic order'. In this matter, dharma or social order is maintained by dharma meaning the right conduct and the fulfillment of duty and religious law. It is further stated that when it comes to social activity, it is traditionally very much circumstanced by tradition, so, when it says one follows dharma, it actually means doing what is morally right. Furthermore, this word is also used in Jainism referring to the complex of duties prescribed by tenets of Jainism. Anyway, since this word is widely used, then it is also used in association with any religion or

<sup>๔</sup> Edward, A. Irons, **Encyclopedia of Buddhism**, (New York: Facts on File, 2008), p.156.

<sup>๕</sup> **The Pāli Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary**, Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, (UK: Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire, 1998), p. 376.

<sup>๖</sup> Constance, A. Jones and James, D. Ryan, **Encyclopedia of Hinduism**, (New York: Facts On File, 2007), pp. 130-131.



faith, Zoroastrian dharma, for instance.

Once many definitions of the concept of Dhamma related to original usages were clearly given, then the evaluations of its effectiveness need to be done in order to critically examine if such a concept by itself contains the possibility in rendering the expected outcome.

Is the concept of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Dhamma appropriate for society?

As far as the criterion of Dhamma is concerned, there was a time when the most venerable Upālī asked for pieces of advice so as to help him judge what is right and what is wrong according to the Buddha's Order while following a solitude way of life. The Buddha said that:

“These doctrines lead one to complete weariness, dispassion, ending, calm, knowledge, the awakening, the cool”-regard them unreservedly as Dhamma, the discipline, the word of the Teacher.”

Elsewhere, in Vinaya Piṭaka, the Buddha gave pieces of advice concerning what is Dhamma, what

is not Dhamma to Pajāpati Gotami that:

“Whatever are the states of which you, Gotami, you may know: these states lead to passionlessness, not to passion, not to bondage, to the absence of bondage, to absence of piling up, to not want more, to contentment, to sociability, to solitude, to putting forth of energy. They lead to ease in supporting oneself, not to difficulty in supporting oneself-you should know definitely, Gotami: this is Dhamma, this is discipline, and this is the Teacher's instruction”<sup>๑๒</sup>

With respect to what has been quoted, it, thus, becomes ample clear that the aforesaid criterion of Dhamma given by the Buddha goes beyond what was held by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar where Prajna and Karuna become the essential root of Dhamma. Therefore, from the above quotations, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar would face intractable problems

<sup>๑๒</sup> A. IV. 143., Ye ca kho tvam, upāli, dhamme jāneyyāsi – ‘ime dhammā ekantanibbidāya virāgāya nirodhāya upasamāya abhiññāya sambodhāya nibbānāya saṃvattanti’ ti; ekamsena, upāli, dhāreyyāsi – ‘eso dhammo eso vinayo etaṃ satthusāsana’ nti.

<sup>๑๒</sup> Vin. II. 259., Ye ca kho tvam, gotami, dhamme jāneyyāsi – ime dhammā virāgāya saṃvattanti no sarāgāya, visaññogāya saṃvattanti no saññogāya, apacayāya saṃvattanti no ācayāya, appicchātāya saṃvattanti no mahicchātāya, santuṭṭhiyā saṃvattanti no asantuṭṭhiyā, pavivekāya saṃvattanti no saṅgaṇikāya, vīriyārambhāya saṃvattanti no kosajjāya, subharatāya saṃvattanti no dubbharatāya; ekamsena, gotami, dhāreyyāsi – eso dhammo, eso vinayo, etaṃ satthusāsana’ nti.

when he took great pains in addressing and ascribing the concept of Dhamma to society in his own ways.

### 3. Conclusion

So far as the concept of DR. B.R. Ambedkar's Dhamma is concerned, it is argued that such a concept possesses incomplete practicable sense for society due to the following reasons: 1) the criterion of Dhamma stemmed from Prajna and Karuna are arbitrarily defined comparing to criterion given by the Buddha in Tipitaka, 2) Etymologically, the word 'Dhamma' by itself in the context of Indian language can be obviously defined in many terms referring to both abstract and concrete usages, duty,

human conduct, and even cosmic law, for instance, and 3) when two concepts, the Religion and the Dhamma, were differentiated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, on the one hand, he claimed the concept of Religion is personal, magic relating to God or Creator and accordingly unfit for social, on the other hand, the concept of Dhamma is opposite and accordingly suitable for society. Based on this reason, it was clearly shown that the first belongs to different culture especially western culture and the latter belongs to Indian culture, thus, both by nature contain big demarcation of fact, the way Dr. B.R. Ambedkar utilized each one to clearly differentiate each other failed to be translated into any action.

บรรณานุกรม

**Ambedkar, B. R., The Buddha and His Dhamma**, Nagpur: Buddha Bhoomi Publication, 1997.

**Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. 1, tr., by T. W. Rhys Davids, Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2001.

**Dialogues of the Buddha**, Vol. 3, tr., by T. W. and C. A. F., Delhi: Low Price Publications, 2001.

Grimes, John, **A Concise of Dictionary of Indian Philosophy**, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Irons, Edward, A., **Encyclopedia of Buddhism**, New York: Facts on File, 2008.

Jones, Constance, A. and Ryan James, D., **Encyclopedia of Hinduism**, New York: Facts On File, 2007.





**The Pāli Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary**, Edited by T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, UK: Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire, 1998.

Abbreviations used in this article

A. =Anguttaranikaya (5vols.)

Vin. = Vinaya Pitaka (5vols.)

Website

Chattha Sangayana Tipitaka: <http://www.tipitaka.org/cst4>

