

Can the Truly Humble Attain Greatness in World Affairs?

by Lila Kate Wheeler

The man who eventually became known as the Buddha, which simply means ‘awakened,’ was born into the ruling class in northern India about 2,600 years ago. Exceedingly well-educated, he is said to have mastered all the skills of warfare and politics as part of his leadership training. However, he was not satisfied that assuming kingship would ultimately provide him with as vast a scope of influence as he desired—history has proven him correct on this count. Buddhist teachings, and the monastic society built to pass them on, survive to the present day in many differing social conditions and contexts, whereas the great kings and merchants of the Buddha’s time are remembered chiefly because of their association with him.

The Buddha’s interest lay not in aggrandizing himself or enlarging his kingdom, but rather in finding the most effective approach to allaying human distress. At the beginning, it was probably his own fright as a young man ‘letting in’ the understanding that he’d get sick and die. After discovering the solution and becoming a Buddha, he didn’t go back and resume kingship, which could have seemed an elevated position from which to pass on his teachings. Rather, he chose to model a simple life as an itinerant teacher.

You might say the Buddha believed in human potential. What he taught was not to rely on divine intervention, but rather on a confidence in the possibility inherent in human life. Energy, reason, and insight are listed among virtues to be cultivated—qualities that have been cited by sages of many ages. An understanding of cause and effect is also critical for our well-being. His spirit of objectivity was directly connected to experiential reality in the moment – this is what distinguishes the Buddha’s insight.

This spirit of objectivity within subjectivity still pervades even the most mystical and exotic- looking forms the tradition has taken over the ensuing centuries. (Though Buddhism has accrued many if not all the trappings of religion, at core, it’s a system of contemplative ethics, where practitioners take responsibility for developing themselves as a kind of personal science.) Morality is discussed in terms of becoming more and more skillfully compassionate and even Buddhist mysticism is based on the understanding that human nature and the world function best when the toxins of greed, hostility, and delusion are not allowed to hold sway over our actions and thoughts.

A fascinating aspect of the Buddha’s thinking is his acute awareness of time. When speaking of external affairs he often mentions good and bad timing, stressing timely interventions. Contemplating the nature of life, it is its impermanence that strikes him most. How shall we spend this interlude between birth and death? The Buddha speaks of fleetingness, working with and accepting the inevitability of change; and equally importantly, understanding that our behavior and thoughts are embedded in a network of cause and effect. Our actions have consequences, both for ourselves and the world.

Success could be measured in terms of well-being, personal and social. Buddhism does not restrict lay practitioners from amassing great wealth and influence, it asks us to abide by basic ethical principles of justice and non-harming throughout – and to be generous. Lay Buddhists are enjoined not to ‘squeeze’ and destroy the sources of livelihood, as bees do not harm flowers. Whatever degree of prosperity one attains should be used to benefit oneself, family and friends, and society as a whole. There are specific instructions on philanthropy, supporting others so that they can engage full-time in beneficial endeavors that may not yield material profit—such as meditation or the arts. Though one’s giving is never miserly, one also keeps in mind the basic well-being of oneself and any dependents.

If the word ‘humility’ is not traditionally part of the Buddhist lexicon, a working Buddhist definition of the term is not difficult to derive. Humility would imply an awareness that one is not omnipotent, that it is necessary to recognize that our actions are embedded in a wider network of cause and effect. In order not to become deluded about our capacity, a degree of introspection and pragmatic self-assessment is needed. Each person progressively refines her or his ethical behavior based on introspection, even mystical contemplation. These are all skills to be practiced, however, and will yield results to whatever degree each person wishes to take them up.

At the deepest level, the Buddha’s humility is based on profound insight: There is no ultimately established self. Though the apparently natural intuition of humans is to think there’s a ‘me’ in here, if you practice insight you’ll soon see that we are an experiential creature and that experience constantly changes. This insight disestablishes the basis on which much of our suffering is constructed. Current scientific understandings of the brain offer a similar view. To be deeply embedded within our embodiment means that our sense of self is an illusion, and our intuitive arrangement of world around a central core of self is erroneous and even somewhat unethical. Buddhist introspection will yield an understanding that the world and self are inter-dependent. This, it seems, is the humility that frees up generosity and the sense of internal freedom and ease we are all thirsting for.

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