

# RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS ON INTERPERSONAL UNDERSTANDING IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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සන්තානගත හා සමාජගත ගැටළු විසඳීමෙහිලා අවශ්‍ය ප්‍රධාන සාධකයක් වන්නේ අන්‍යෝන්‍ය අවබෝධය හා විශ්වාසයයි. විවිධත්වය තුළ ජීවත්වියක් ඇති කිරීමෙහි ලා ඉවහල් කරගත හැකි අන්‍යෝන්‍ය අවබෝධය හා විශ්වාසය පිළිබඳ බොහෝ ආගමික දාර්ශනික ඉගැන්වීම් තුළ විශේෂයෙන් අවධාරණය වී තිබේ. මෙම කෙටි අධ්‍යයනය තුළින් දැනුම, අවබෝධය, විශ්වාසය ආදිය බෞද්ධ සූත්‍රගත ඉගැන්වීම්හි විග්‍රහ වන ආකාරය පිළිබඳ ඉදිරිපත් කරනු ලැබේ.

## 1. Introductory Remarks

The harmonious existence of human beings is dependent on inter-personnel understanding which makes the foundation for social relationships. Inter-personal understanding and social relationships are inseparably interconnected and make the foundation of a harmonious society. As far as the modern world is concerned, many problematic situations have emerged due to the lack of understanding among us<sup>1</sup>. This can be viewed from many points of view which cover almost all areas such as religion, culture, politics, economics etc. A harmonious relationship is possible only when there is understanding among the individuals in society or social institutions.

Every human being should have a good understanding of the needs and aspirations of others. If not, life becomes meaningless and worthless. Religious teachings are replete with advice on

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සංස්. ආචාර්ය සුජය මිමුරේ ගුණානන්ද හිමි, මහාචාර්ය ඊශා හේවාබෝවල, මහාචාර්ය සුසන්ත මහඳුල්පත, ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ කලීකාචාර්ය ප්‍රියංකර රත්නායක

මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨ ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය, 19 කලාපය, 2012/13, මානවශාස්ත්‍ර පීඨය, කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලය

interpersonal understanding. The objective of such teachings is to mould mental, verbal and physical behavior of an individual in the best way and create a harmonious society in which people are living with mutual respect and understanding with each other irrespective of any differences<sup>2</sup>. A lack of mutual understanding and disintegration of social relationships are two basic phenomena that could be viewed in society and this has affected the smooth function of society. On account of this, human society is faced with insurmountable problems and difficulties such as wars, crimes, violation of human rights, conflicts and mental problems etc. It is obvious that one of the ways of avoiding and lessening of such unhappy incidents is to have interpersonal understanding as a way of life.

## **2. Nature of Modern Society.**

One of the most significant features of modern life is its competitiveness. Even modern education entangles children and elders in a competition and has little concern for interpersonal understanding. All are entangled in a never-ending competition in which religious, social, cultural and ethical values have little significance. This makes the distance among fellow beings widen and gives way to intolerance, fanaticism and creates a training ground for disharmony and lack of unity.

In a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic world, the contribution that religion can do towards interpersonal understanding is immense, for instance, Buddhist teachings related to interpersonal understanding, just like any other religion, are of paramount importance in upgrading human understanding to have a better way of life<sup>3</sup>. Duties and responsibilities of individuals prescribed in the teachings are one example of interpersonal understanding<sup>4</sup>. When they are observed individually and socially, many a better result could be achieved. On the other hand, the Five Precepts which lay the foundation for social relationships and understanding are a part of its wider moral and social philosophy<sup>5</sup>.

Different religions have explained them on different foundations and have their own interpretations. Whatever may be the way that religions have interpreted human society, it strengthens the relationship of individuals and upgrade their behavior in any social environment. Hence, mutual respect, understanding, human dignity and social harmony are some of the results of interpersonal understanding. It is important to note that social relationships are built up on the basis of interpersonal understandings. A mutual understanding leads to mutual respect and a harmonious relationship. When these are persistent, there develops strong relationships and they can be social, religious, cultural, economic spiritual etc.

### **3. Knowing and Understanding**

It is obvious that knowing and understanding are two different things and are inseparably interrelated. To understand is to comprehend things and it makes the individual take things in a broad perspective. In this regard, feelings, perceptions and mental formations play a vital role as they are the inner foundations of human behavior<sup>6</sup>. For instance, the following two sentences give two different meanings. When it is said; “I know it.” and “I understand it.”, they convey two different meanings. Where there is understanding, then there are fewer complexities and ambiguities. Yet when there is just knowing, complexities and ambiguities are more. In understanding things, the first step is the knowing and when it is developed further, a certain kind of understanding is possible<sup>7</sup>. For instance, our views, ideas, concepts are results of our understandings. When it is said, “I know this and that”, it conveys the meaning of a collection of data but when it is said “I understand it”, it signifies our ability to discern and therefore, our views, ideas, concepts have involvement in this. In this regard, the spiritual practices recommended in different religions are of prime importance because spiritual training means the bringing of mind to a less complex level where one may understand things in their

true perspective<sup>8</sup>. Every religion teaches a way of life. Religion has been influenced by geography, culture politics and the economic conditions of different countries and nations. Therefore, in understanding religious teachings and their background, the above facts have to be taken into consideration.

#### **4. Different Needs and Interpersonal Understanding**

Human beings need interpersonal understanding in order to reduce suffering and increase happiness. When there is no interpersonal understanding, there increases unhappiness and decreases happiness because misunderstanding lead to the breakdown of relationships, disharmony and arising of conflicts etc.<sup>9</sup>. Hence, all religions, in various ways have enlightened humankind as to the technique of maintaining a good understanding with our fellow beings irrespective of differences. The elements that make human beings divided and disharmonious are widespread and therefore, only a mutual understanding could expel the darkness of human society<sup>10</sup>. Unity in diversity is a much needed thing in our modern society.

It is a common phenomenon that we all have strong needs. Our needs can be classified as: *secular needs*, *need for protection*, *educational needs*, *social needs*, *economic needs* and *spiritual needs*<sup>11</sup>. Our entering into the bond of marriage signifies the need to lead a good secular life. The relationship that exists between children and parents denotes our need for protection. Our desire for gaining knowledge symbolizes the need for education. The interaction with our near and dear ones implies the need of social relationships. Ownership of wealth and employees denotes the fulfillment of the need of economic realities whereas our belief and adherence to a religion means the need of spiritual development<sup>12</sup>. All these signify our human existence and social interaction is nothing but filling of each others' needs. In the fulfillment of various kinds of needs, there should be a strong foundation of interpersonal

understanding. When two people have a weak understanding and each fills the others' insufficiently, there is a weak understanding. When both people have strong understanding and each fills the others needs fully, there is no room for misunderstanding; consequently a strong understanding and relationship is built. As it is necessary to maintain good understanding and relationships to fulfill each other's needs to the extent that one fills the needs of others, the nature and foundation of one's understanding and relationships are decided. i.e. fragile, well-built or placid. Hence, interpersonal understanding signifies the good ground that one makes to fill the needs of others and to build strong relationships with fellow beings. Particularly, a comprehensive understanding is very necessary among different people and various institutions of society. In this regard, it is important to understand one as it makes the best foundation in understanding others<sup>13</sup>. Once there is understanding of one's mental, physical and verbal activities, there is no room for wrong ways of behavior or misconduct. To understand others, a clear vision is needed and that is why one's mental attitude is significant in this regard. There should be enough room for the views of others and their ideologies in one's mind. Whether one accepts or not, believes or not, one can have a respect towards the views of others and this is a great human quality<sup>14</sup>.

## **5. Necessity of Interpersonal Understanding**

Interpersonal understanding is required as there is diversity among human beings. As the world is variegated and diversified, interpersonal understanding in building good relationships among us as well as all other social institutions is of prime importance. This understanding should come within us due to the fact that all social institutions comprise of individuals. In this context, religion can play a vital role in making a common foundation for all beings to build a harmonious relationship with others irrespective of their differences. Although different religions have different foundations

yet, every religion is dedicated for the promotion of loving-kindness, harmony, peace, mutual respect, understanding and social justice among human beings. The religious teachings related to interpersonal understanding have psychological, ethical, social, communicative and metaphysical significance.

For instance, according to the Buddhist view of society, humans are social beings and have various social interactions on which life is dependent and they are mainly related to society by way of their behavior such as mental, physical and verbal<sup>15</sup>. The development of these activities to a better level provides the very basic foundation for a happy existence which is one of the aspirations of every being. Interpersonal understanding is directly related to human behavior. The mental basis of verbal and physical activities is of prime importance in this regard because they have a great influence on the formation of views, ideas and concepts. The mental functions concerned such as feeling, perception and conceptualization are of vital importance. Feelings signify the foundation of our emotions whereas the perception and mental formation denote the intellectual side of the human mind<sup>16</sup>. Hence, a better understanding is generated only when the above functions of the human mind have a good mental foundation. For instance, conflicts, misunderstandings, breakdown of social relationships take place when our emotions and intellect do not have a good mental background<sup>17</sup>.

In this context, mental domain denotes the psychological aspect of human understanding and relationships and physical behavior denotes the ethical or moral side of human understanding and relationships. When the verbal domain is concerned, it signifies the human communication which lays a good foundation for interpersonal understanding and relationships. These three foundations of human interaction create a very strong bond among our fellow beings which functions towards humanity either good or bad.

## **6. Mental Foundation**

The views, thoughts, ideas and concepts are generated in human mind as a result of the contact of objects with the relevant faculties. The final result is the formation of various kinds of concepts in our mind. We are used to view the world of phenomena on the basis of the concepts already generated in our mind. As these concepts can be either right or wrong, it is one's responsibility to make necessary ground to have right concepts in our mind. Almost all the religions have paved way towards a correction of our ideologies, views, thoughts, concepts etc. For instance, the Noble Eight Fold Path, Five Precepts etc. are some of the examples which have a great impact on mental and physical behavior of the individual<sup>18</sup>. They generate the thoughts of benevolence, loving-kindness, truthfulness, generosity, peace and harmony among fellow human beings.

On the other hand, belief, faith and investigation<sup>19</sup> are also paramount of importance in having a good understanding among our fellow beings. Every religion has given a prominent place for the above elements of the human mind. For instance in Buddhism, faith is a spiritual faculty that should be developed to its fullest level<sup>20</sup>. This sort of belief and concentration of such spiritual elements are important for us to have a good understanding of the universe and our own life. It is obvious that understanding does not come to us without belief, trust, investigation and practice.

## **7. Communication: an Essential Channel for Interpersonal Understanding**

Another significant aspect of interpersonal understanding is the truthfulness and trustworthiness. In this regard, our communication is an important channel for interpersonal understanding. Communication becomes meaningful if we have the practice of using right and true words. This is considered one of the most powerful channels of building relationships.

According to Buddhism, communication should be based on truthfulness and trustworthiness and this is a very much emphasized concept in many religions. In Buddhism, there is no room to deceive any one and deception is an abominable and detestable element of human society. Basically, communication has two aspects, i.e. meaningful communication and meaningless communication. When communication is based on truthfulness, it becomes meaningful and in communication where there is deception, it becomes meaningless communication<sup>21</sup>.

Meaningless communication is classified into four aspects according to Buddhism as follows:-

- Use of falsehood in communication (deception)
- Use of harsh words in communication (ill-will)
- Use of harmful words in communication ( disharmony)
- Use of worthless words in communication (time consuming)

False communication which deceives the listeners makes things worse and leads to disintegration, disharmony, conflicts and so many social problems. It is said that the person who deliberately tells lies can do any kind of harm to society and the whole society is misled by his act of dishonesty. The very objective of harmful communication is to find short ways to achieve happiness, the harsh words bring stress and uneasiness in society and lead to the rise of conflicts at various levels. Harmful words create disharmony and injury to others whereas worthless words consume our valuable time. Hence, wrong employment of our words stands as a stumbling block for interpersonal understanding and relationships. Advice given with self-interest or interest of others or with the expectation of advantageous falsehood, should not be uttered. The words that make harmony, integration, friendship brotherhood and understanding should be told.



One should adhere to the followings in communication: i.e. communication in the right time, imparting of right facts, right use of language, use of meaningful facts, inner motive of well-being etc. Moreover in communication, one should be mindful of the application of pleasing words, pleasant talk, unblemished, method, meaningfulness, making obvious facts very clearly, drawing of receivers attention, good presentation and receiver's rejoice etc. A good understanding is only possible when something is presented in an orderly manner with an organization of facts and objective of making fairness, non-expectation of undeserved advantages, prevention of conflicts etc.

These facts denote that the words should be uttered in accordance with one's conscience, qualities and with a pleasant attitude towards fellow beings. An individual is a social being and his expectations should be the well-being and happiness of all. For this reason, understanding by others is a must for a happy existence. As a result of a submission to falsehood or use of unethical communication, many misunderstandings, social conflicts, disharmony in different social institutions such as in the unit of family, political institutions etc., may arise.

According to Buddhism, the person who tells lies is a weak person and does not have the means to look after himself and has a backward journey. In this regard, more than knowing (collection of data), the understanding is the most important and should be expressed based on what one has experienced because understanding comes with experience. An empirical as well as a rational foundation of the use of language is very necessary for interpersonal understanding. Then, there is no possibility of untruth coming from anyone.

Advice is given to totally abstain from falsehood in Buddhism and promote truthfulness in society. It is clearly indicated that

- One should not tell lies .
- One should not cause others to tell lies.
- One should not approve of others telling lies.
- One should promote truthfulness in every possible way<sup>22</sup>.

Hence communication has a very broad implication in religion and it is inseparably connected to inter-personal understanding.

### **8. Interpersonal Understanding in Social Relationships**

A mutual understanding comes only when our social relationships are harmless with our fellow beings. The nature of the social behavior of individuals towards others is an important aspect to understand them. For instance, according to Buddhism, the basic social relationships are : Husband and wife( secular needs), children and parents (protective needs), students and teachers(educational needs), friends and associates(social needs), employers and employees(economic needs) and clergy and laity(spiritual needs)<sup>23</sup>. These social relationships denote the basic structure of human society. A good moral foundation is necessary to maintain a mutual understanding among these social institutions and within these social institutions.

For instance, mutual understanding between husband and wife is a must for a harmonious family life. This is a secular institution which makes a strong bond between two people. This bond has many a future expectation. One such is the expectation of leading a good married life and to provide good members to society for its existence. Although there is a strong bond here due to the psychological and blood relationship, we find many problems arising in this social institution due to a lack of understanding. Hence, advice is given to maintain good faith, hospitality, timely supply of food, protection of wealth and diligence within the unit of family. When there is no good understanding between a husband and a wife, the above becomes extremely difficult. The family is the

foundation of society from which members come to society. An exemplary family life is greatly appreciated in Buddhism where harmony and peace begin<sup>24</sup>. Just as husband and wife, the relationship of parents and children are equally important in many ways. A good understanding is very much necessary when parents become aged and it is the duty and responsibility of every individual to give full protection and care for their aged parents. It becomes a blessing and a path for their further progress.

The understanding between employees and employers denotes the foundation needed for economic conditions and human resource management<sup>25</sup>. The material foundation of socio-economic development is dependent on the mutual understanding of each other's needs. (employees and employers)<sup>26</sup>. The wealth of owning servants and attendants is helpful to unburden the heaviness of mundane life. This makes it easy for one to do one's duties with fulfillment and step on new ventures in life away from a cumbersome state. The individual as well as society to a great extent, depend on material development and it is a dominant factor in deciding the nature and social level of one's life. Many malpractices that happen in social institutions are due to mismanagement of human resources<sup>27</sup>. In this regard, a better understanding between employees and employers is a must<sup>28</sup>.

Peace, harmony and the prevention of conflicts are the main objectives of any social institution. In this regard, religion is unique as it makes the necessary background for mutual understanding among individuals and institutions in society. Religion as a social institution has to attend not only to the spiritual needs but also to the other needs of individuals irrespective of differences<sup>29</sup>. To be true to religious teachings is the best way for interpersonal understanding because it makes the necessary mental background for mental, physical and verbal behavior towards others. There is no room for deception and spreading of disharmonious thoughts

that make ground for conflicts and unfaithfulness to family and society when one is true to one's religion<sup>30</sup>. This could bring about unity among the diversity of different communities, followers of different religions, cultures and the privileged and the underprivileged.

## **9. Cultivation of Good Thoughts in Interpersonal Understanding**

We are living in a complex and diversified society in which one may find different views and ideologies and some are in conformity with our views and some are not. Therefore, the generation of good thoughts towards fellow beings leads to the understanding of the diversity and unity of human society<sup>31</sup>. In this regard, the cultivation of the Four Noble Qualities of Mind is of prime importance. They are, Loving-kindness (*metta, active love*), compassion (*karuna, preventive love*), soft-heartedness (*mudita, appreciative love*) and equanimity (*upekkha, disinterested love*)<sup>32</sup>.

Loving-kindness and compassion dispel ill-will towards other fellow beings. Compassion is helpful to give a practical significance to the inner thoughts of loving-kindness. Soft-heartedness is significant in building friendship with other communities and with those who have different views. The quality of equanimity which signifies the lack of prejudice towards the whole society is also very much needed. These qualities of the human mind do not allow us to practice of social injustice due to religious, cultural, political, economic, communal or ethnic differences as they provide the required mental environment for interpersonal understanding.

## **10. Concluding Remarks**

A systematic organization of human thoughts is one way to have mutual understanding and to create a conflict free society. A collective effort towards the fulfilling of each other's needs is seen in the teachings of social relationships found in Buddhism and they

bring about a positive attitude, a strong bond of the spirit of friendship and brotherhood among different social institutions. The conflicts, disagreements, obstacles and disharmony among us are due to the lack of understanding among us. When our thoughts are based on the spiritual realities taught in different religions, unity among diversity is possible. Spiritual values should be maintained in all our social interactions. On the basis of interpersonal understanding and respect, when we render our service within and outside of communities, religious teachings become more meaningful. With all our differences, if we could develop a good social relationship, it becomes a great and remarkable social achievement. Religion is not only to fulfill the spiritual needs of people but provide guidance to lead a good secular life. It should guide the individual towards the correct path of social, economic, cultural and political realities. Religion is the highest social institution that promotes the spirit of brotherhood and friendship among us. All other institutions try to enhance this goal by different methods, foundations and ways but religion, on the basis of spirituality, tries to reach this goal. Spirituality towards which all religions are dedicated, signifies the highest achievement that all could reach when they are true to their conscience.

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