

Aditya Kumar Gupta, Kanika Saraf
(Delhi, Indie)

HEDONISM AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY OF PEACE: AN EXAMINATION

Human being, like other animals, is a creature who desires pleasure and avoids pain. It is natural for a man to avail or allow only those moments which give pleasure to him and to go away from moments of pain. But despite being pleasure-loving, what do we get in the end? Do we remain happy after we get pleasure? Why is it so that a pleasure creates a type of boredom after some time which, later on, develops the desire for another or higher pleasures? What is the mystery of human life – we seek pleasure but remain unsatisfied even after we get it? The Proposed article is the critical study of hedonism in the light of Indian philosophy of Renunciation and Peace.

The term 'Hedonism' comes from Latin term '*Hedone*', which means pleasure. This is the philosophy which believes in pleasure as the aim of life and of any particular human action. Why do we do any particular task which is voluntary in nature? What do we want to get in the end? Hedonists answer these questions in one word – pleasure. Here by 'pleasure' they mean sensual pleasures which include even mental pleasure¹. There are six commonly accepted sense organs – Eyes, Ears, Nose, Skin, Tongue and Mind. Pleasure is always associated with these six sense organs.

Hedonism is based on two assumptions, – a metaphysical and a psychological. According to Metaphysical assumption, self or mind is purely sensuous in nature, a series of sensations, feelings, appetites, and instincts. Hedonism based

¹ In Indian Philosophy Mind has been taken as a sense organ.

on psychological assumption says that man naturally seeks pleasure and avoids pain. 'Desires are primarily directed towards pleasure'. Somewhere based on these two assumptions, we find two main forms of hedonism—Psychological and Ethical hedonism.

Psychological hedonism is the theory that pleasure is the natural end and motive of human actions. We always seek pleasure and avoid pain. Things are desired not for their own sake but for the sake of pleasure they give us. Jeremy Bentham (1741–1832) and J.S. Mill (1806–1873) are the main supporters of this view. In his book 'An Introduction to the principles of morals and legislation', Bentham says, "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure..."². For him, pleasure and pain are the only possible motives to action. Similarly J.S. Mill says, "Desiring a thing and finding it pleasant, aversion to it and thinking of it as painful are phenomena entirely inseparable, rather two parts of same phenomena; to think of an object desirable, and to think of it as pleasant, are one and same thing; to desire anything, except in proportion as the idea of it is pleasant, is a physical and metaphysical impossibility"³.

Though agreed on the fact that human being, naturally, is pleasure-seeking, Bentham and Mill differ from each other when it comes to the nature of pleasure. Bentham is of the view that all pleasures are of same type; the difference is only of degrees. He holds that only standard of valuation of pleasure is quantitative. He prescribes seven parameters of judging the value of pleasure namely, Intensity, Duration, Proximity, Certainty, Purity (freedom from pain), Fecundity (Fruitfulness), and Extent etc. Qualitatively all pleasures are of same type. Mill, on the other hand, recognizes qualitative differences of pleasures. He says, "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and valuable than others"⁴.

The hedonism was criticised on various grounds even in western world. According to Rashdall⁵, hedonism involves a *hysteron proteron* i.e. it puts the cart before the horse. The satisfaction of desire brings pleasure but it does not mean that pleasure is desired. Similarly Sidgwick says that, "The impulse towards

² Bentham, introduction to the principles of morals and legislation, 1789, ch. I.

³ Mill, J.S., Utilitarianism, 1863, New York, 1953, pp.41-42.

⁴ Ibid, Ch. II.

⁵ Rashdall, Hastings, The theory of Good and Evil, The Clarendon Press, United Kingdom, 1907.

pleasure, if too predominant, defeats its own aim”⁶. The more we seek pleasure, the less we get it. If our attention is directed towards the object of desire, pleasure comes of itself when it is attained. But ‘if we direct our attention to pleasure, we are almost sure to miss it’. This is basically a paradox of hedonism.

However, if we see these criticisms of hedonism closely, we find even these are based on same basic misunderstandings which the supporters have. Critics have tried to find the problem in hedonism on the basis of empirical observation, they could not reach the root cause of sufferings and pain. They just observed the fact that desire for pleasure ultimately leads to the pain. The whole Indian Philosophy (Except Carvāka) has paid maximum attention in understanding the root cause of human sufferings and illusive nature of sensual pleasures. For Indians philosophers, phenomena of pleasure and pain, actually, is associated with attachment. Whenever there is pleasure or pain out of any event, result or association, the close observation will tell us that the attachment is working behind it. The world is neutral and so are its events, situations and things. This world in itself is not capable of giving us pleasure or pain. It is same for everybody, but the presence or absence of attachment gives us pleasure or pain. The nature of attachment is such that it contains both pleasure and pain in it. Pleasure and pain are the two sides of the same coin. It is impossible to find a pleasure with which this or that type of pain is not associated- directly or indirectly, immediately or in near future. The same is true for any pain; it is also associated with some pleasures though generally we are unable to see it. Pleasure and pains are like twin sisters whose body is joined by any particular organ from back side; we can't see them at the same time but both are always together. If there is attachment in life, pleasure or pain are bound to be there. This attachment can be towards anything, person, situation or status etc. In other words, if we find pleasure or pain at any moment of life, close examination will reveal its association with attachment in us. However the amount of pleasure or pain depends on the intensity of attachment. If ‘I am attached to any person with great intensity, I will have the possibility of getting pleasure or pain in the same amount’. Those events, persons or status, which are not related to us and nor we are attached to them, will neither give us pleasure nor pain. This truth can easily be understood with the phenomena of ‘Death’. When any near and dear one

⁶ Sidgwick, Methods of ethics

dies, we reach in miserable condition. But death in itself is not the reason of pain here, it is the attachment with that person, rather, which is making us painful. Death of unknown person does not create any pain in us because we are indifferent to that person. Attachment and pleasure-pain are all internal, subjective phenomena and we should not try to find them in external world.

The problem with common human being is that we always desire pleasure and avoid pain. Metaphysically it is impossible. The two will always come together. We desire pleasure and we get it but after some time it brings a set of sufferings with it. We are unable to realize the contradiction found in it and this unexpected contradiction leads us to frustration. To come out of frustration, we seek another set of pleasures but we come in the grip of same vicious circle. It goes on and on in our life. Common human life is the journey dwindling between such circles of pleasure and pain.

Now, what is the remedy? If pleasure and pain are always together and attachment is the reason behind them, logically there are two ways to come out of this cycle: 1. going beyond pleasure and pain by the minimization or extinction of attachment from our life. Or 2. Remaining neutral and same during both pleasure and pain. This is the path of peace. Indian seers and philosophers recognized this mystery of attachment and cycle of pleasure or pain. None of the Indian Philosophical schools have prescribed to follow the path of sensual pleasure. Their prescription is the path of peace.

Seers of the Vedas and Upanishads pray to the ultimate reality for peace. Shānti mantras are prayers for peace. Generally they are recited at the beginning and end of any religious and spiritual discourse or ritual. 'These mantras are supposed to calm the mind of the person who recites and the environment around him /her'. The three utterances of the word 'shāntih' are aimed at removing obstacles from three realms of human life-physical or external world, divine and internal world. In *Yajurveda*⁷ we find a wonderful prayer-

Aum dyauh śāntirantarikṣam śāntiḥ
ṛthivi śāntirāpaḥ śāntiroṣadbayaḥ śāntiḥ
vanaspatayaḥ śāntirviśvedevāḥ śāntirbrahma śāntiḥ
sarvaṁ śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ
sā mā śāntiredhi
Aum śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ, śāntiḥ

⁷ *Yajurveda* 36:17

May peace radiate there in the whole sky as well as in the vast ethereal space everywhere.

May peace reign all over this earth, in water and in all herbs, trees and creepers.

May peace flow over the whole universe.

May peace be in the Supreme Being Brahman.

And may there always exist in all peace and peace alone.

Aum peace, peace and peace to us and all beings!⁸

In *Ish Upanishad*⁹, seer reminds us that everything in the world is covered with Lord so we should develop a sense of detachment. Only those who have this sense of detachment or renunciation can enjoy the world. Similarly in *Kath Upanishad*¹⁰, when Yama asks Nachiketā to take all worldly pleasures in lieu of third boon, he denies them by saying that they are short-lived and temporary. In *Gāta*¹¹, Krishna teaches Arjun a lesson of detachment in actions (Nishkām Karma). 'So far we are in the world, we have to work day and night but we should not covet for fruits of the action (Karmanye vādhikāraṣṭe Mā Phaleshu Kadāchana). Krishna is aware of such contradictory results of our sensual desires. Desire of pleasure necessarily brings pain along with pleasure. In verse thirty eight of second chapter, The Gita tells us to deal pleasure and pain with same mental state.¹²

Buddhist philosophy revolves around the best efforts to remove *trishnā* or *tanhā* (Craving for enjoyment) from life. Within Buddhism, *tanhā* is defined as the craving to hold on to pleasurable experiences, to be separated from painful or unpleasant experiences, and for neutral experiences or feelings not to decline.¹³ In his twelve link cycle of miseries (Pratityasamutpāda), the Buddha

⁸ Translation by Swami Abhedananda, Ramakrishna Vedanta Math, India

⁹ Ishopanishad, I-1, Advaita Ashram, Kolkata

¹⁰ Kath Upanishad I.1-25

¹¹ Gita, Chapter Two, Verse -47

¹² *sukha-duhkhe* same *kritvā* lābhālabhau jayājayau

¹³ The Buddha identified three types of *tanhā*:

Kāma-tanhā (sense-craving): craving for sense objects which provide pleasant feeling, or craving for sensory pleasures.

Bhāva-tanhā (craving to be): craving to be something, to unite with an experience. This includes craving to be solid and ongoing, to be a being that has a past and a future, and craving to prevail and dominate over others.

identified *tanhā* as a principal cause in the arising of various sufferings. In this present life if we want to get rid of miseries (nirvana), we have to remove all attachments of sense organs.

In Jainism, four basic reasons (*kasāyas*) are identified which are the root cause of bondage- Anger, Pride, Delusion And, Greed. But if we see carefully we can easily assess that delusion or *moha* is most basic out of these four. When object of attachment goes away from us, we feel angry; for the object of attachment we are greedy and when we possess that object we feel proud. Here also, it is clear that all spiritual activities are directed for the removal of attachment in life.

The great Śāṅkara was the supporter of knowledge path for moksha (Liberation) but in his *sādhana catustya* (four moral prerequisites), the second prescription is *ehāmutraphala bhogaviraga*¹⁴ i.e. leave the desire for pleasures here or here after. Even he was of the view that attachment not only creates pleasures and pains in life but it is destructive as well for the path of spirituality.

Thus we see Indians have given more importance to peace over pleasure. However, it does not mean we should remain away from objects of so called pleasure. Peace is not the state of running away from pleasure or pain. It is the state of remaining neutral to both. This is a middle path between the two extremes of self indulgence and self mortification. Nature of peace is that it has no attachment with it. This is the unique thing with peace that it cannot be desired (sensually), it is the product of remaining neutral and balanced in life. The level of neutrality and balance will decide the level of peace in life.

Here, at this point it is must to clear the fact that pessimistic silence is not the peace. We should not take both in the same way. In distress or in pessimism, there is apparent 'peace', but that 'peace' is not the real peace. Peace is real only when there is no attachment behind it. In pessimism or distress, actually there is attachment to the negative things. It is nothing else but pain in silent mode.

However, we must not think that path of peace is without happiness. It also speaks of Bliss i.e. supreme happiness. According to Indian seers, the real happiness is not found in worldly material objects but in infinite (*Yabhvai bhūmah tat sukham, Na alpe sukham asti*)¹⁵. Now these infinities can be different in

Vibhāva-tanhā (craving not to be): craving to not experience the world, and to be nothing; a wish to be separated from painful feelings.

¹⁴ Vivekacūḍāmani, 19

¹⁵ Chhāndogya Upanishad, Chapter seven, 23-1

the life of different people. For some these are ethical and moral rules, whereas for others some religious truths are infinite.

Indians, not only, declared peace as the goal of life but also evolved certain ways to realize it. Path of peace will be based on the nature of peace. Nature of peace is non-attachment, so any thing which attaches us cannot be the path of peace. Middle path in life, Nishkāma Karma and bhakti, or meditation are some of the paths.

In modern era of globalization, where we have all instruments of pleasure available, the path of peace is relevant. Here, there is run for pleasures all around but the mental peace is missing. The possession of all means of pleasures are not the deciding factors for human beings' life. The quality of life should be judged on the basis of active peace in one's life.

Summary

This paper deals with critical analysis of western hedonism in the light of Indian theory of peace. Indian Philosophers have made 'peace' the goal of worldly human life, which is keeping equidistance from pleasure and pain. Attachment is the reason behind the presence of these two 'sovereign masters' of Human life. External thing or any other human being is not capable of indulging us either of them; it is the worldly attachment which brings Pleasure and pain. Pleasure and pain always come together. Western Hedonists could not go to the root of pleasure or pain in life. Their observation was mere empirical. Indian thinkers, except those of Carvaka school, have given a particular philosophy which is Peace oriented and which finds worldly pleasures or pains temporary and mostly 'man-made'.

Key words: hedonism, life, pleasure, pain, tragedy, peace, human being

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Dr Aditya Kumar Gupta

Dept. Of Philosophy, Faculty Of Arts, University Of Delhi

Kanika Saraf

Dept. Of Philosophy, Faculty Of Arts, University Of Delhi