

Buddhist Practice : A Paradigm Shift for Contemporary Social Work Professionals

Bushra Barkati

Abstract

In present context we are heading towards building rich economy and India being the 5th largest economy (World Economy Ranking, 2023) on one hand and on the other hand richest 1% of the total population bags nearly twice the wealth of the country resulting in widening disparities, inequalities, power imbalances and exacerbating injustices. It becomes essential to introduce the readers with a concept “Buddhist Practice in the Realm of Social Work Discourse” that can be a win-win situation strengthening the economy and uplifting the marginalized thereby driving towards holistic welfare. Not a single discipline is left untouched from ‘dominant social paradigm’ and often authors positioning the “social question” it becomes all the more necessity to ponder on healthy and effective ways of understanding and implementing the idea of Buddhist Economics instead of ideally strengthening economically at the cost of those who are marginalized and thereby playing unwittingly a prominent role in widening the ditch between have and have not. Readers will get an understanding of what role Buddhism can play in professional social work. The readers will get an insight on the relation between Buddhism and social work practice, and the necessity for integration of Buddhist practice and ethics within the realm of social work profession. The author has made sincere efforts to ignite spark within the academic fraternity to intertwine the two; “the Buddhism and Social Work” and add new knowledge within the literature. This paper would also make the readers understand the importance thereby connecting Buddhism and Social Work Profession as the existing literature in Buddhist social work is limited and lacks the required attention.

Introduction

* Doctoral Scholar at University of Delhi in Department of Social Work. Email- barkatibushra29@gmail.com

“Watching weeds grow in the garden turns out to be a powerful lesson outside the classroom. First, the weeds look innocently beautiful until they start invading the space of the expensive grass that is fighting for survival. Alarmed, the gardener moves into action with an industrial-strength weedkiller. Before long, the herbicide poisons both the weeds and grass. Alas, weeks later, it is the weed that manages to survive the new level of toxicity in the soil and springs back to life ahead of the grass. The battle resumes with the weeds ahead”, Shi(2018).

Before going deeper into the Buddhist economist, it becomes necessary to understand the relevance of Buddhist principles in the Social Work Profession although it has remained neglected and ignored till date. The proliferating literature in Buddhism is witnessed within the dimensions and confined walls of secularism (Muncaster & Dylan,2021). In contemporary time professional social work has somewhere lost something which used to be its core essential component-through industrialization, globalization, neo-liberal policies, and professionalization. Something is missing at both the levels, the conceptual and the practicum(Akimoto and Sakamoto,2012, Akimoto, 2013).

The contemporary socio-political realities and the widening disparities and injustices have compelled the profession to understand the concept of justice from the lens of Buddhist teachings and put it forward the imperatives into practice.

Review of Literature

Buddhism practices within the discipline of social work not only teaches mindfulness but also a way to lead a quality life(Tatsuru,2013). With the burgeoning literature on ecological justice and scholars’ concerns for human action, induced crises adversely impacting the non-humans, the flora and the fauna thereby depleting the whole ecosystem. It becomes crucial and vital to understand the Buddhist Social Work with a perspective of promoting quality life to one and all dwelling on the mother Earth. The relevance of Buddhism within the social work discourse is still scarce yet emerging.

Myths associated within the Realm of Buddhism

When the word ‘Buddhist’ comes into consideration what popularly and generally portrayed is majorly an austere life and people still hold the notion to cut-off from worldly matters into a complete state of private solace, state of hermetic bliss. Whilst, if we go deep into the preachings of Buddha, we will find holistic and rich teaching touching upon each aspect of human life and also the beings around us with numerous ways on how

to live with integrity, wisdom and peace amidst a chaotic world driven by capitalism and hoarding material possession. Author does believe that embracing a particular religion like Buddhism does not mean the rejection of another religion or of one's own community. In fact, it is important that those of you who have embraced Buddhism should not isolate oneself from your own community and society; you should continue to live within your own community and with its members. This is not only for your sake but for others' also because by rejecting your community you obviously cannot benefit others, which actually is the basic aim of teachings.

Prerequisite for Social Work Practitioners

The way to live a life from a Buddhist perspective is encompassed with compassion, equanimity, tolerance, concern for self-reliance and individual responsibility, which are pertinent essentialities to be a professional social worker.

A study conducted in Hanoi 2012, depicted the relation between 'Buddhism, psychology and Social Work' questioning what are the possible similarities and differences between social work and Buddhism concluded the principle context of Buddhism is to understand the root causes of all sufferings of humans and path to liberation. Similarly as the Social Work profession understands the problems people face in their lifetime and professional techniques to deliberate issues by supporting, intervening, providing therapy (related resources and services) of social work practitioner to ensure ability, increased social functioning for individual, family and community with motivation, action and cognition of emotion, behavior, prevention, therapy are all guaranteed social security. The social worker's compassion is the prerequisite for intense social work practice within the profession (Balachandra, 2006).

The Buddhism ideology and Social work profession per se based on the principle believe in self-reliance; the dignity of each individual; cultivate a spirit of openness, cooperation and understanding, goodwill, and equality (Loan, 2013 & Tdechapolokul, 2014). Perhaps in these contemporary times it becomes imperative for each and every discipline to develop an understanding of the dire need of Buddhist Economics. The author has made deliberate efforts to how as professional social workers can build strategies to change other's lives, build a quality life at same time congruence with the environment and economy building and has also discussed role of social work paradigm within the purview of Buddhist Economics, as the world move towards the ladder of economic upliftment.

The Eightfold noble path; the Buddha's teaching within social work are of high relevance in the contemporary 'social' driven world. Other

than what the conventional social work foundations are for example at the macro level emphasizing on social activism for policy change, at the micro level, human case work, group work and the community work practice .Whilst, the Buddhist economics emphasizes on right based approach to emphasize and address the structural inequalities within the pursuit of social justice(Muncaster & Dylan, 2021).

The Canadian Association of Social Workers addresses the profession values such as Service to humanity, which incorporates compassion, which leads to respect for individual worth and dignity which can further go beyond cynicism(CASW,2021).

Buddhist Economics and Social Work Profession

At present the economics that we are functioning on, is deeply rooted within the frames of capitalism. When discussions pertaining to economics occur or related matters around the discourse, we seldom use a Western vocabulary and our thought process is confined within the conceptual framework of Western economic theory.

At contemporary times, Westernized concepts and existing structures have reached a point which many feel to be a dead end or if not,demanding new paradigms of thought and frameworks. It can be evidently witnessed that the presently existing disciplines are facing a crisis to completely resolve the issues and challenges the world is going through– new ways must be established.

The author has offered a Buddhist perspective on the subject of 'Buddhist Economics' and what eminent role it can play in the social work profession. From the existing literature and understanding towards the discourse, readers will be provided with many tools for reflection, ways of viewing the economic questions based on a considered appreciation of the way things are, the way we as professionals are, by this literature what Dhammavijaya(1992) calls as might be a short way towards resolving what has been called the current 'impasse of economics', and emphasis of author is to make social work professionals and practitioners understand the possible ways which can be applied in contemporary times to uproot the ills through the economic angles of Buddha's teaching. For example, the injustice faced by the poor, the power imbalance, the oppression faced by **down-trodden** and what pertinent role can the implementation of Buddha economics play if **amalgamated with the Social Work Paradigm**.

In the literary work of Zsolnai,(2011) Buddhist teachings and principles are in contrast to western economics; the capitalist driven economies. The practice of Buddhism promotes the modification of desires for the benefit of individuals, communities and nature(the non- human creatures). The

other encourages hedonism (belief that pleasure is the most important thing in life and the accumulation of wealth). The constant battlefield within individual minds also extends to the physical world. By training the mind to be less dependent on toxic sensations, the materialistic world will help to build a balanced state of co-existence of the whole ecosystem thereby, assuring mental and physical wellbeing, for the self and other beings.

Buddhist Ethics

Ethics is one of the important components in resolving the crisis which mankind is facing and making it worse for the whole environment. Ethics affect economics both directly and indirectly.

For instance, Western companies send medicines to third-world countries that they are forbidden from selling in their own countries. Those so-called 'medicines' endanger the health and lives of those who consume them. In economic terms, it causes a decline in the quality and efficiency of labor while also necessitating increased expenditure on health care, which is a drain on the nation. While working with Individual, groups and communities social work practitioners must be aware of their own prejudices, biases, privileges and the emotional triggers (controlled emotions), empathy this all directly tied to the Buddhism teaching on mindfulness (Wong et al., 2008).

The practice of effective mindfulness as the teaching of Buddhism principles assures not only an ethical decision making but also, ensures the diversity, inclusion, equity, access.

Benefits of incorporating Buddhism in Social Work Discourse

Social work discipline holds the potential to remove injustices worldwide thereby incorporating buddhism in order. Social worker teaching and practice can lead to Buddhist practices prioritize mindfulness of oneself and their surroundings too. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2021) code of ethics "recognition of individual and professional integrity" reflexive approach can be fruitful, the increased viability of social justice activism for example 'me too movement', 'anti-racist protest', 'the black lives matters', 'indigenous movement'.

Contemporary socio political realities have brought social justice to the fore to buddhism cores. Dylan & Muncaster (2021) in their work "Buddhism and Social Work: A Primer potentially examine the two concepts Buddhism and Multi-Level Social Work Practice thereby suggesting the future researchers to explore and portray the necessity of Buddhism in activism and interconnections between the two.

Buddha's eightfold principles hold much relevance in social work practicum in contemporary context, at the macro level the self-identified

vulnerabilities of the poor can be tackled through activism emphasizing for policy change. Mezzo level involves community engagement that has been a step forward in bringing a holistic change and the micro level is not just confined to individual and group but further extended to reflexive practice, engaging in activism to curb the existing structural inequalities centered on **'pursuit of social justice'**.

The social work profession strives for humanity in resemblance with Buddha ethics Karuna (Compassion) encompassing respect and worth of every individual, that can further be extended to practice kindness which acts as an antidote for cynicism and burnout which are prevalent and evident within the social work profession (James, et.al., 1990).

Buddhist Management

Buddhist approach to the management of the Firms, Corporates and Industries (the BEIM approach) offers an embedded and morally robust approach to CSR and sustainable management offering a bridging capability, bridging the tensions between the economic wellness and the ethics (Dennivey, 2009).

For example, the sixties scoop in which the indigenous children were sent to non-indigenous foster homes must examine the privileges that unwittingly harms the individual, groups and communities.

Buddhist teachings emphasize on removing the obstacles to a healthy life such as greed, anger and delusion. A practitioner sows the seeds through right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (known together called as Noble Eightfold Path) and engaging the training of ethics, meditative concentration and wisdom. The focus of Buddhist practice is to lessen suffering, for the self and others by the cultivation of one inexhaustible natural resource, the mind, in order to produce human attributes (Muncaster & Dylan, 2021).

Conclusion

Buddhist practice and teachings are not an independent discipline rather it is interdependent and intertwined with other disciplines working in a holistic manner. The problem lies in our confined thoughts, considering our only discipline to be capable of solving all problems and challenges itself. However, it is not only a mistaken notion, it limits our vision to understand the problem from a wider angle, but also prevents practitioners from achieving a holistic solution to the problem. If this underlying challenge is understood then we can explore and understand how Buddhist practices connect with Social Work Profession other social sciences, disciplines, and

human activities, and how pertinent the role the domain plays in education, ethics and in dealing with human problems for a holistic welfare of the ecosystem.

REFERENCES

- Bachandran, P. (2006, May 15). Plea to adopt Buddhist economics. *The Hindustan Times*.
- Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2021 March,26). Social Work Code of Ethics. <https://www.casw-acts.ca/en/Code-of-Ethics%20and%20Scope%20of%20Practice>
- Dhammavijaya, J.B.(2016). Buddhist Economics. Wat Nyanavesakavan. www.watnyanaves.net
- Devinney, T.M. (2009) 'Is the socially responsible corporation a myth? The good, bad and ugly or corporate social responsibility', *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 23(2),44–5.
- Dudley, James R. & Helfgott, C.(1990) "Exploring a place for spirituality in the social work curriculum". *Journal of Social Work Education*. 26(3).287-294.
- FocusEconomics(2023,July 12).The World's Top 5 Largest Economies in 2026. <https://www.focus-economics.com/blog/the-largest-economies-in-the-world/>
- Shi, J.(2018). Buddhist Economics: A Cultural Alternative. In S. Yamash'ta et al. (eds.), *The Kyoto Manifesto for Global Economics*, *Creative Economy* 417-435. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6478-4_23
- Tatsuru, A.(2013) The Role of Buddhism in Social Work Vietnam and Japan. *Asia and Pacific Association of Social Work*.
- Loan, H.N.(2013) "Psychological Foundation to Resemble Social Actions Between Buddhism and Social Work. In Akimoto(Eds.), *Role of Buddhism and Social Work: Vietnam and Japan*(pp.20-29).Asia and Pacific Association of Social Work.
- Tatsuru, A.(2013). The Roles of Buddhism in Social Work: Vietnam and Japan. <http://id.nii.ac.jp/1137/00000207/>
- Tdechapolokul,S.(2014)"The Paradox of Happiness in Western Economics : A Buddhist Perspective". *Prajna Vihara:Journal of Philosophy and Religion*.16(1). <http://www.assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/PrajnaVihara/article/view/1225>
- Muncaster, K.,& Dylan.(2021, March 30). Buddhism and Social Work: A Primer. Canadian Buddhist Studies.<https://cjbuddhist.wordpress.com/2021/03/30/blog-buddhism-and-social-work-a-primer/>
- Wong., Renita.Y. & Vinsky, J.(2008). A Critical Reflection on "the

spiritual but not religious” discourse in Social Work. *British Journal of Social Work*.39(7).1343-1359.

Zsolnai, L. (2011). Why Buddhist economics? In L. Zsolnai (Ed.), *Ethical principles and economic transformation—a Buddhist approach* (pp. 3–17). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.