

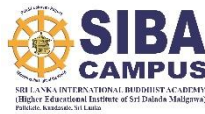
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**How Do People Get Motivated? A Critical Evaluation  
from a Buddhist Perspective**

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## How Do People Get Motivated? A Critical Evaluation from a Buddhist Perspective

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Motivation is the process that initiates, guides, and maintains goal-oriented behaviors of human beings and animals. Motivation is what causes us to act in different situations. Motivation covers three aspects of behavior: states that motivate behavior, behavior motivated by these states and the goals of such behavior (Silva, 1979). The Buddha's theory of human motivation is based on certain key factors shared by all human beings and is primarily concerned with the nature of human dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) and how to dispel it. Buddhism also talks about the good and bad side of human motivation.

Some behaviors that human beings display as the result of motivation may be problematic. As human beings, from the day we are born into this world until the time of death, we face many problems and life itself has become a problem that should be solved very carefully. Buddhism is always ready to discuss and analyze the problems of human beings. Here, the Buddhist theory of motivation is very important. As do the western psychological theories of motivation, the Buddhist theory of motivation clearly explains and analyzes how problems arise, what the causes of those problems are, what the result of those problems are, etc.

As there are theories of motivation in psychology presented by various psychologists, in Buddhism there is a teaching concerning motivation. The Buddhist theory of motivation is very important as Buddhism teaches this theory of motivation to answer the problems that human beings face. The main aim of Buddhism is to find solutions for the problems that are connected with human beings and society (Rahula, 1978). Buddhism accepts that the whole world is full of problems and it has become a mess. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* presents the problematic situation of the world thus:

“Inside is also problematic. Outside is also problematic. So, Ven. Sir who solves this problem?”<sup>1</sup>

The main teachings of Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariya saccāni*), Dependent Co-arising (*paṭicca samuppāda*) etc., clearly explain how the problems of humans arise and how those problems are solved. According to Buddhism, there are two main types of problems (Thilakaratna, 2008). They are internal and external. Craving and the wrong vision are the causes for internal problems and there are many other reasons for external problems.

Today, we come across various problems of youth, economic problems, marriage problems, family problems, social and cultural problems, etc. Actually, Buddhism considers all these social problems as basic or primary problems and analyzes and emphasizes accordingly. According to Buddhism a problem arises because of primary human qualities or needs rather than because of the social background and finds correct solutions starting at this point.

Today, the world is developing with science and technology. Though science and technology try to facilitate human life, when we clearly observe the situation, we can understand that science and technology are creating problems for human life and society (Dhammadassi, 2008). Though we have very developed scientific and technological equipment, day by day, human beings suffer a lot. Especially, among the youth a lot of problems developed. Poverty, unemployment, stress, anger, various diseases and many other physiological and psychological problems have developed. Many problems have arisen connected with matters of religion, race, and nation, etc. Buddhism as a profound doctrine has covered all sides of human life and is also aware of human problems and always ready to answer those problems.

As Thouless (2000) mentions, Buddhism is a fundamental method of psychotherapy which is concerned with relief from emotional burdens, not only for the sake of this life, but also for the sake of future lives (p. 5). When we deeply observe the doctrine of Buddhism, we can see that if we solve basic human problems we can solve those social problems. The Buddhist theory of motivation tries to analyze and answer both those human and social problems.

In Psychology, motivation is considered as the activation of goal oriented behavior (Bindra, 1959). Motives are hypothetical states that activate behavior, propelling one towards goals and incentives which are also inferred from behavior (Rathus, 2008). In psychology, we speak about physiological and psychological needs. Physiological needs include oxygen, food, drink, pain avoidance, proper transpiration, and elimination of waste products for our survival. The Buddha in the “Sabbāsava Sutta and Asamaya Samaya Sutta” clearly mentions these motives. The psychological needs include needs for achievement, power, self-esteem, social approval and belongings etc. The “Sīla Sutta” of the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* talks about this matter. The psychological and physiological needs give rise to drives. A drive is a condition of arousal in an organism that is associated with a need (Lorand, 2000). Depletion of food gives rise to hunger and depletion of liquids gives rise to the thirst drive. Psychological needs for approval, achievement and belonging give rise to drives. The motivation concept in psychology also talks about an incentive which can be an object, person or situation perceived as being capable of satisfying a need. When considering motivation in psychology, instincts are considered as an inherited disposition to activate specific behavior patterns attempt to reach certain goals. The goals of motivation can be either positive or negative and positive goals are those that people try to gain or acquire while negative goals are what people try to avoid (Silva, 1979).

According to Prof. Silva (1970), the Buddhist psychology of motivation is directly concerned with the factors that lead to human unrest, tension, and general anxiety and suffering (p. 35). The motivation in Buddhism focuses on finding the roots of unrest and shows the path to happiness. Therefore, the Buddhist theory of motivation is also therapeutic.

The Buddhist theory of motivation presents four types of major motives. The *Āṅguttara Nikāya* mentions those four major motives thus.

1. *Jivitukāma* - The motivation to live the life.
2. *Amaritukāma* - The motivation to avoid death and live forever (to be mortal).
3. *Sukhakāma*- The motivation for comfort and happiness.
4. *Dukkhsapatikkūla* -The motivation for avoidance of suffering and discomfort<sup>2</sup>

According to Buddhism, these four types of motives are intrinsically rooted in human beings. According to the Majjhima Nikāya, these four motives are the foundation for all sorts of other behaviors (p. 656). These motives are considered as basic or primary.

In the same way, Buddhism talks about a secondary type of motivation. This secondary type of motivation creates a great effect on the behavior of human beings, especially resulting in wrong behavior. This secondary type of motivation has three components which is called “Mūla”, which means “root, cause, reason”, etc. These Mūla, or roots, can be wholesome (Kusala Mūla) or unwholesome (Akusala Mūla). The three unwholesome motives are:

1. *Lobha* - Greed-creates positive approach desires.
2. *Dosa* - Hatred-creates avoidance desires.
3. *Moha* - Delusion- creates confusion in the mind (*Sabbāsava Sutta*)

The motivation of Lobha, or greed, motivates the person to get something that the person desires and the motive of Dosa, or hatred, motivates a person to avoid or detach from something, while the motive of Moha, or delusion, creates a messy, confused and wrong understanding about something.

In the same way, in some other Buddhist discourses these three main motives are collectively called “Tanhā” or craving. The simple meaning of “Tanhā”, or craving, is thirst. And actually, this Tanhā or craving is the motive that creates the powerful necessity to obtain something in the mind of an individual. This craving also has three components or three types as follows.

1. *Kama Tanhā* - Craving or drive for sensuous gratification.
2. *Bhava Tanhā*- Craving for self-preservation
3. *Vibhava Tanhā*- Craving or drive for annihilation and aggressive tendencies (*Dhamma Cakkappavattana Sutta*)

According to the Buddhist analysis of motivation, these Akusala Mūla and three types of craving lead or direct the individual to any type of behavior. As there exist three Akusala Mūla or unwholesome roots, in the same way, there exist three wholesome roots or three Kusala Mūla. They are: -

1. *Alobha* - Non-greed
2. *Adosa* - Non-hatred
3. *Amoha* - Wisdom (*Nidāna Sutta*)

These Kusala Mūlas or wholesome roots direct the person towards good behavior.

As Buddhism teaches, both these wholesome and unwholesome roots of motivation can be seen within the individual and according to the power of those motives, the individual acts goodly or badly. Actually, as Buddhism teaches, an individual's unwholesome motives are very much more powerful than wholesome motives, but they can be controlled or manipulated (Nidāna Sutta). Therefore, according to the Buddhist theory of motivation, the above mentioned four types of motives and secondary types of motivation are very important.

The western psychological theories of motivation tell that when a person tries to fulfill his or her needs he or she follows a hierarchy or a procedure step by step. The psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a fine example. In the same way, the Buddha teaches that, when a person tries to fulfill his or her needs, he follows a procedure step by step. As the "Pattakamma Sutta" of the Aṅguttara Nikāya describes when fulfilling a wish an individual,

1. First- earning wealth righteously
2. Second- getting social fame and reputation.
3. Third- living for a long time with relatives and friends.
4. Fourth- getting success in the next life (p. 458).

So, according to the Buddhist theory of motivation, an individual fulfills his or her needs step by step according to the above-mentioned procedure. In the same way, motivation theory in Buddhism talks about three persons

1. *Rāga Carita* - a person who is much greedy.
2. *Dosa Carita* - a person who has much hatred.
3. *Moha Carita* - a person who is very ignorant (*Nidāna Sutta*)

In the "*Saddhā Sutta*," it talks about two persons called Saddhānusari and Dhammānusari who motivate towards confidence, or Saddhā, and towards the Buddhist doctrine respectively.

Thus, the Buddhist theory of motivation examines the good and bad side of human motivation and it emphasizes the necessity of wholesome motivation to attain Nibbana. Further, it is obvious that the concepts and teachings taught in the Buddhist theory of motivation are very practical and it can be applied to any type of problems that we face in our day today activities.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “*Anto jatā bahi jatā- jatāya jatitā pajā Taṃ taṃ gotama pucchāmi- ko imaṃ vijataye jaṭam.*” p. 578

<sup>2</sup> AN. p. 456