

A SISYPHEAN TASK: THE BUDDHA'S PERSEVERANCE AND ITS APPLICATION TO RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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ซิชีฟัสตัวละครในตำนานของกรีก เป็นสัญลักษณ์ของความบากบั่นพากเพียร ซึ่งเป็นคุณลักษณะอย่างหนึ่งของมนุษย์ที่มักจะได้รับการบันทึกจดจำไว้และเป็นที่ยกย่องเชิดชูตามที่ทราบกันทั่วไป คำว่า “ภาระกิจของซิชีฟัส” หมายถึงความพากเพียรพยายามที่จะปฏิบัติภารกิจอย่างใดอย่างหนึ่ง ซึ่งดูเหมือนจะไม่มีทางทำได้สำเร็จและไม่มีวันจบสิ้นด้วย พระพุทธเจ้าเองก็ทรงเป็นตัวแทนของพลังแห่งความพากเพียรขณะที่พระองค์ทรงพยายามบำเพ็ญเพียรผ่านทศกิริยาต่าง ๆ เพื่อบรรลุถึงการตรัสรู้ ถึงแม้ว่าภารกิจของซิชีฟัสต้องใช้ความเพียรทางกายภาพ แต่สิ่งที่สำคัญที่สุดคือพลังใจ ถ้าเราสามารถเอาชนะใจตนเองได้เราจะก้าวข้ามอุปสรรคต่าง ๆ ได้ไม่ว่าอุปสรรคนั้นจะยากเย็นเพียงใดก็ตาม บทความนี้จะตรวจสอบตัวอย่างของบุคคลต่าง ๆ ที่มีคุณลักษณะที่น่าสรรเสริญเหล่านี้

Abstract

Sisyphus, a character in Greek mythology, symbolizes the power of perseverance, an aspect of human beings often chronicled and revered. The word “Sisyphean task”, as it became known, represents the struggle to perform a task that seems to be unattainable or never-ending. The Buddha himself also embodied the power of perseverance as he struggled through seemingly endless obstacles on the way to achieve enlightenment. Although the “Sisyphean task” requires physical effort, the most important requirement involves our mental state. If we can master the mind, then no obstacle, no matter how difficult, can be conquered. This essay examines examples of people who have possessed these traits.

INTRODUCTION

In the complex and fast-changing world that we are living in today, many actions that we undertake require a tremendous amount of effort and faith. Not only are we bound by the circumstances that we choose based on our own wills, we are also being constrained by many factors increasingly beyond our control. Destiny also plays a part in providing us opportunities to choose what objectives we wish to pursue in life. It can be said that though we humans are born equal, the chances and tasks that come our way are vastly different for each of us. For some of us, the most important mission in our lives is to perform a task that seems impossible to achieve and endless, but is somehow self-fulfilling and gratifying to our mind and spirit.

It is also a common dilemma for human to want to acquire the good things in life without really working for it. In the book entitled “The Power of Perseverance”, there is a passage stating that whatever we want in life cannot be achieved by just dreaming about it or begging a higher being for it.¹ There are no shortcut, magic spells, or any other way to attain our objectives other than putting effort into it. Even the Buddha taught that success can only be reached through our own perseverance (*viriyena dhukkhamaccheti*). The Buddha himself also experienced the process of perseverance on the way to achieve enlightenment. The path to accomplish our objectives is not smoothly paved, but is filled with rough patches and bumps. Those who reach the top are the ones who persevere through hardships, difficulties, and uncontrollable factors, while never giving up or look back. They are also the ones who refuse to be confined by their destinies or whatever limitations they have to encounter.

We can select many examples of individuals who spend their lives performing a task that appears to others to be futile and pointless. These individuals are viewed by some as heroes or by others as fools. Whatever the opinions of the masses may be, the deeds performed by these individuals will be long remembered by many. The achievements set by them have proved to be inspirations to normal people who are weary of the daily grind without much hope of ever fulfilling their dreams. It is said that what set some of us apart from another is mostly in the mind. Motivation comes from deep inside of us, and the best sources of motivation can be provided by a mythological figure. One of the best cases that exemplify this point is the case of Sisyphus,

who originated in Greek mythology. My attempt in this paper is made to demythologize the mythology of Sisyphus through different examples of real stories in this present day world to inculcate the true meaning of the Buddhist doctrine of 'Perseverance' (*virīya*). My approach in this paper is dialogical hermeneutics, which is a science and art of understanding our own life.

The Myth of Sisyphus – The Origins of the “Sisyphus task”:

Sisyphus was a figure in Greek mythology who came to symbolize never-ending and unrelenting labor. As a king, Sisyphus was known for his cunning and deceitfulness, in his quest for maintaining his dominance in commerce. He was also known for his betrayal of his own kin and even the mighty Zeus, the king of all Greek gods. By betraying Zeus's secrets and thinking that he could be in the same rank as the gods, Sisyphus was punished by Zeus and sent to the underworld. But being very clever, he fooled and chained Hades, the ruler of the underworld. Eventually, another god intervened and Sisyphus was again imprisoned.

In another story of his cunning, Sisyphus devised a way to escape the underworld. He lured his wife into putting his unburied body on public display instead of burying it as a wife is required to do. He then asked and was given the god's permission to return from the underworld to scold his wife for her infraction. Once out in the upper world, Sisyphus basked in the happiness of the earth and refused to return to serve his time. The intervention by the god Mercury was necessary to forcibly bring Sisyphus back, where as a punishment for fooling the gods, he was condemned to push a giant rock up a hill, and upon nearing the top, to helplessly watch the rock roll back down to the bottom again. This task was to be repeated by Sisyphus over and over again for eternity.

As a representation of the eternal labor of rolling rock uphill, the word “Sisyphus task” or “Sisyphus challenge” was created. The word depicts a task where the goal is never achieved, yet is repeated to go on and on without end. Many interpretations of the word have been made over the years by different scholars and philosophers. From comparing this constant and never-ending task to the ongoing rise and fall of the sun and of the waves in the sea to the representation of man's vain attempt in the pursuit of knowledge, “Sisyphus task” became a common reference.

The Sisyphean task and the power of perseverance of the Buddha: Setting aside the more negative aspects of the Sisyphus myth and his punishment, one aspect of “Sisyphus task” that needs to be examined is that it came to represent the positive power of perseverance. The task that Sisyphus undertakes everyday and for eternity not only requires physical effort, but also mental strength. It can be said that Sisyphus performed his task knowing full well that there was little or no chance of success. Yet, he endured the physical hardship by having a positive outlook and inner willpower. The French existentialist and admirer of the absurd, Albert Camus, said that “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” as “the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart”. For it is a most common trait of man to feel disheartened when having to push himself to perform a task that seems futile and hopeless. It is the inner gratification that drove Sisyphus to repeatedly do the same things over and over again. Camus also said that “At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock”. Based on his idea of the absurd, Camus aimed to show a dualism or paradox that exists in the human psyche. For example, we greatly value life and existence, yet we know full well that eventually we will die and all our undertakings will be meaningless. How then can we go on and value a life that has no meaning? Though Sisyphus’s labor was deemed to be excruciating and pointless, Sisyphus still persisted. Sisyphus strongly believes that he could win over whatever his fate belies him. He fully committed himself to his inner beliefs and it was this full commitment which provided him with motivation and made him able to continue to push his rock.

What do we mean when we say that Sisyphus represents the power of perseverance? Power can be described as a force that cannot be seen by the naked eyes, but that which can be felt spiritually and radiates potent energy. The power of this energy can be a driving force for a person to perform things that he or she could not normally do. The mental energy translates into physical energy which can help a person perform great feats. Perseverance is an ongoing action performed physically, but is driven by the willpower of individual. It can drive a person to overcome all obstacles. It requires patience and the faith and belief in oneself. In the book, *The Power of Perseverance*, perseverance is described as being one aspect of the mind, and of being neutral in respect to the objective that the person is trying to achieve. If a person

perseveres to do good deeds, this will lead to happiness and success in life. However, if a person perseveres to do bad deeds, this will lead to unhappiness and troubles in life.

The power of perseverance can be illustrated in the context of the Buddha's path toward enlightenment. During his long period of deep meditation to achieve enlightenment, Prince Siddhartha's mind was free of all distractions, whether these came from outside forces or from within his mind. Although the perseverance by Siddhartha to achieve enlightenment did not require physical energy as in the myth of Sisyphus, it is similar in that it necessitated unrelenting willpower. Another commonality is that both Siddhartha and Sisyphus undertook tasks that were deemed to be almost unattainable and endless. Siddhartha did not know from the outset that his mission would be met with success. It was his strong, inner belief that kept him from giving up throughout his ordeal. The perseverance of the Buddha can also be interpreted in terms of performing tasks without expectation. He realized that desire and expectation cannot lead to true happiness and peace, for when we do not find what we are searching for we are miserable, and even when we do find the pleasure we seek, it soon fades and we have to look for something new. Therefore, just like Sisyphus, he came to a conclusion that it is essential that we live in the present moment and concentrate on performing our tasks, though repetitive, to the fullest extent.

THE REAL WORLD

In the real world, there are many exceptional individuals who emphasize the "Sisyphian task and the Buddha's Perseverance", which can be interpreted in many ways, from the struggle to help save the environment to the fight for democracy. For some, it is a labor of love. For others, it involves a responsibility to themselves and to the greater whole. But one thing is common to all practitioners of these principles is that the task before them are seemingly endless, repetitive, and very difficult to succeed. Some has spent literally their whole lives dedicating to their causes. Tremendous sacrifices had to be made in their personal and family lives. For many, this task means they had to be away from their homelands, friends, and ones they loved. These individuals possess the capacities and inner spirit to undertake and succeed in

these special tasks. These individuals are scattered all over the world and have existed in many periods of time. The results of their undertakings not only benefited the doers themselves, but also have affected many people and many generations. With this in mind, it is extremely gratifying to analyze the origin and to understand the motives behind the actions of these special individuals.

The labor for the environment: In the Srisaket province in the northeast of Thailand, a story emerged in 2008 about a man who dedicated his life to planting one tree per day for 20 years to help save the environment. Lt. Vichai Suriyuth planted in his spare time from his work as a policeman, He planted trees in empty spaces along roads, public areas, etc., without being contracted by anyone. He never received any compensation for his labor. His labor was often met with the laughter of local villagers who thought he was crazy.

Two million trees were the result of over 20 years of perseverance and dedication to the cause that transformed his native district from one of the driest areas in the country, to one that is green and luscious.² The type of tree Vichai planted were mostly palm trees, because palm trees could endure dryness better than other tree types. He used seeds instead of other tree parts to ensure vast distribution. He would start planting trees just before the rainy season began and also during the rainy season in areas that has a lot of open air and moisture. On May 1 of every year, he would start his labor to commemorate the importance of Labor Day in Thailand. He estimated that he planted approximately 100 seeds per day.

Vichai became famous overnight from a TV commercial for an energy drink that highlighted his tireless and selfless sacrifice. When the commercial first aired, many people thought that he was a fictitious character. But when it became clear he was an actual person, he drew the attention of the Thai media. Government organizations presented him with rewards. Yet Vichai life remained the same. He continues to plant trees every day till now. He still uses his trusted motorcycle to go to any area he considers a prime location for growing trees. Before and after his regular hours as policemen, he goes out, without fail, to do what he loves.

Instead of letting his fame “go to his head”, Vichai is still a humble person who still lives the same life as before. He has been approached by political party to help promote its cause and ideology, but Vichai steadfastly

refuses to get involved. His motive for his work is that whatever benefit he receives from his work also benefits his country. He feels that if others take inspiration from him, they would also feel as satisfied about themselves as Vichai feels about himself. If the whole country gets involved, Thailand will progress. The unity of people into this one common cause will create power for all people.

The fight for the animals: Jane Goodall is the symbol of the continuing and seemingly endless fight for the cause of man's closest counterpart, chimpanzees. Opposed by many primatologists for her unique methods in studying chimpanzees, Jane has to continually fight to use her own methods. Her love and understanding of the chimpanzees goes beyond any normal boundary. Jane strongly feels that human and chimpanzee are related in more ways than just sharing similar genes. The range of feelings and emotions displayed by chimpanzees are similar to humans, as is their need for family and social relationships. Her work demonstrated there is no clear line separating human and apes in terms of rationale and behavior. She totally commits her life to the study of the way that chimpanzees live by living among them in Tanzania. During her experience, she not only learned their most common behaviors, but also discovered what man had wrongly conceived over the years: that only man can construct and use tools, and that chimpanzees are vegetarians. Furthermore, Jane dispelled the long-common beliefs that chimpanzees were only peaceful in nature, by seeing through her own eyes how chimpanzees had an aggressive nature and could kill fellow chimpanzees and other animals. This finding showed that human and chimpanzees share a darker side.

Jane became attached to chimpanzees at an early age when her mother gave her a toy chimpanzee. Her mother was her biggest supporter in the fight for the study of chimpanzees, and even accompanied Jane to live in Tanzania when Jane was just starting her work as a chimpanzee researcher. Though she was not trained as a primatologist, Jane somehow was able to find her way into working with the famous archeologist, Louis Leakey. Through sheer dedication, she was able to impress Leakey and was assigned to oversee the project on chimpanzees at the Gombe National Reserve in Tanzania. Up until now, it has been 38 years that Jane has been doing research in Gombe. When Jane first arrived in Gombe, she was prepared to go into the jungle on her own, in order to explore the natural habitat of the chimpanzees. In 1960, it was very dangerous for a young woman of Jane's age to go into the jungle

alone, but Jane did not let this obstacle deter her from her work. Initially she was discouraged that the chimps would not let her get within 50 yards of them. She could not get any cooperation from her subjects. But through her perseverance she eventually grew very close to the chimps at Gombe. They would soon allow her to follow them, as they led the way. They greet her as they do each other, with a touch or a kiss. Her sense of patience and trust won them over. More obstacles were about to greet Jane and her mother, who accompanied her. They both were inflicted with malaria. For weeks, they were confined in bed with fever and had little energy. It would be a long period before Jane could recover from the illness.

What Jane Goodall shows us is that it is not necessary to accept the prior scientific findings that might not be totally accurate. She showed courage and determination in defying the rules and opened our eyes into what are the real facts about our closest animal relative. Her method of giving chimpanzees names, instead of using numbers, was not readily accepted by her peers. Jane was also criticized by her colleagues and classmates by using descriptive, narrative writing in her observations and calculations. She also demonstrated by showing persistence in getting a Ph.D. in ethology from Cambridge University in 1965. Jane is one of only eight persons in the world who got her Ph.D., without ever having received a bachelor degree before. Her mentor, Louis Leakey, suggested that Jane get her doctorate degree in order to be more acceptable to the media, which Jane needed as a source to help publicize her work. Jane reluctantly agreed to spare time from her work in Tanzania to obtain the degree.

Today, Jane is still very much involved in her work to study and help save chimpanzees. She continues to promote conservation. Jane created the Chimpanzee Guardian Project and has set up several halfway homes for injured or orphaned chimps found in the wild. She advocates the ethical treatment of Chimpanzees in research and zoos. She teaches the humane way to study chimps in a lab setting. Jane created the Roots and Shoots program for school children to learn about wild animals and conservation of the environment. Since it is imperative that this labor is continued by new generations of dedicated people.

The endless fight for democracy: Perhaps one of the most recognizable names and faces around the world, Aung San Suu Kyi is a prime

example of individuals who tirelessly and voluntarily work for the principle of democracy. Her labor has been going on for many years and is still continuing today. Without any end in sight, she keeps on fighting for the noblest cause that any country strives for, freedom. What she wishes for is very simple and the freedom she is asking is for freedom for herself and freedom for her people. Though Burma is basically a very peaceful country with peaceful people, it is being ruled by a military regime that oppresses the rights and freedom of its people. The regime dictates the way that the Burmese live and express themselves.

She was born into a political heritage. Her father was the founder of the modern Burmese army and took part in the negotiation of Burma's independence from the United Kingdom. Her mother was a former Burmese ambassador. Yet Suu Kyi was never forced to take on the task of leading her people against the military ruler. Her inspiration came from her desire to fight the injustices that has taken over her homeland. During a visit back to Burma to visit her ailing mother, from England where she was living with her husband, Suu Kyi became involved with the pro-democracy movement against the military ruler of Burma. She sacrificed her personal life for the cause of her beloved homeland, Suu Kyi would rarely have the chance to see her husband before he later died in 1999. Besides losing precious time with her husband, she was also kept apart from her two children, who still live in the United Kingdom. The responsibility and care that Suu Kyi feels for her people, goes beyond what any of us could possibly imagine. She is as dedicated to her country, as a loving mother would be to her child. The military regime put her under enormous pressure time and again to force her to leave Burma. But every time, she showed strong determination and composure to withstand anything that was thrown at her.

Suu Kyi uses nonviolent means to oppose the Burmese military regime, as she was influenced by the late Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy and also by the peaceful Buddhist concepts. She cited the faith she has in Dharma to help her remain mentally stable. By meditation, she would remain mindful of what she need to achieve, and not get caught up in all the troubles she was facing. The only way out of the deadlock with the military, to her, would be to negotiate and find a common ground. She would be repeatedly put under house arrest for her refusal to conform to her opposition. Though she was falsely accused of instigating rebellion, she never incited her followers to cause

any uprising that would lead to any form of violence. Over and over again, she would keep her composure and perseverance without showing any sign of fatigue or despair. The latest incident against her in 2009 involved a foreigner entering her compound while she was inside. It caused the military ruler to accuse her of cooperating with the foreigner and resulted in her being placed under house arrest again. In June 2010, Suu Kyi celebrated her 65 birthday, locked up in her home. International condemnation of this event has been voiced from all around the world.³

World leaders all offer their voices in demanding that the military ruler release her from her confinement. President Barrack Obama and the U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon have voiced their support for Suu Kyi. Throughout the past 20 years in Burma, she has been detained 15 years. She is the only Noble Peace Laureate in the world that has been imprisoned.⁴

The fight for independence: Another well-known example is the fight for the independence of Tibet by the Dalai Lama. In a much similar way to Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama advocates the use of nonviolent means to counter the oppression from a much stronger and more powerful opposition, the Chinese government. To most of the world, he is revered as one of the greatest champions of mankind's precious right to live one's life according to one's own values and customs. To Tibetans, he is an enlightened being who delays his own spiritual union with the supreme spirit in order to serve humanity. In his fight for Tibet, he has lived in exile ever since 1959.⁵ For over four decades till now, he has traveled all over the world to ask for support of his cause which is to stop the destruction of the Tibetan culture by China. He has compared this atrocity to the Jewish Holocaust of WWII. Over 6,000 temples in Tibet have been damaged and over one million Tibetans have died.⁶

The struggle to free Tibet has been very costly for the Dalai Lama. It began when he was taken from his family when he was only two years old to train in the Buddhist principles and diplomacy. Then at 15, he was elevated to head Tibet in its fight with China. Later on, he was forced to leave his homeland. During his time in exile, his mother and brother passed away. But the pain that was hardest to endure was seeing so many of his people lose their lives in the fight for freedom. In addition, over 40 years of his quest for the independence of Tibet has yet still to bear fruit.

Yet, despite the hardship that he has to face for so many years, the

Dalai Lama has kept up his determination, his positive thinking, his joy for life and his dedication to peace. No matter how difficult the circumstance, people from all over the world will rarely see him react in an angry manner. What you see is the perpetual smile and kindness toward his audience. When asked what his religion is, he replied that compassion is his religion. He preaches that if a person wants to achieve happiness, he must be compassionate. If a person wants others to be happy, he must also be compassionate toward them. He also suggests that our enemies are our best teacher for teaching us how to persevere.

Another principle that the Dalai Lama has upheld is to how to compromise and search for common grounds. His latest approach is to give up the fight for Tibet's independence and to support a "Middle Way Approach", which advocates abandoning the fight for independence in exchange for China giving Tibet cultural autonomy. This controversial stance has divided the international Tibetan community. Many younger Tibetans take a more militant approach and are not willing to compromise in their fight for independence. So far, this approach by the Dalai Lama is yet to be accepted by China. Now, at the age of 73 and troubled by poor health, the struggle for the cause of Tibet is fast approaching 50 years. But still, the Dalai Lama refuses to give up the pursuit for what he believes is his responsibility as long as he lives.⁷

The fight for the poor: Poverty is a state of living experienced by millions around the world. The fight to help the poor to improve their life is a noble task, exemplified by the work of Muhammad Yunus. Yunus is a Bangladeshi banker and an economist who dedicated his life to the poor. The labor that Yunus undertakes is extremely challenging, as poverty and inequality have existed throughout history. To Yunus, poverty is the most important factor in creating conflict in this world. The world cannot be peaceful unless poverty is eradicated. Though it is an idealistic vision, Yunus managed to translate this vision into practical action for the benefit of millions of people, not only in Bangladesh, but also in many other countries.

His main weapon against poverty is to give out loans to the poor. Loans to poor people without any financial security had appeared to be an impossible idea. While he was a professor in economics, Yunus started to realize that the ongoing project to help the poor rarely have an effect on the poorest people. He then decided to investigate the truth behind the failure of

this project and found out that commercial banks were not keen on lending to the very poor. The only solution was to do the lending himself. Therefore, Yunus started his own bank called Grameen Bank. The bank's main borrowers were from the poorest rank which had no land as collateral. By giving the poor a chance to have a better life without wanting to reap benefits, Yunus discovered that the debts were fully repaid up to 98%, the success rate that no commercial bank could boast of. Women were the borrowers who put the loans into the most effective usage. Therefore, 95% of the loans were given to women. Yunus' project had to face many difficulties and oppositions. Yunus and his colleagues had to endure everything from violent radical leftists to the conservative clergy who told women that they would be denied a Muslim burial if they borrowed money from the Grameen Bank. But with much perseverance, Yunus sticks to his ideal and was able to pass through these ordeals. As time passed, the small borrowers learned how to save and have the capabilities to obtain more loans to improve their houses, to buy land, and expand businesses. In addition, these loans helped develop the communities through investments in new technologies that helped improve the agricultural and textile sectors. The loan project for the poor that Yunus started in Bangladesh spread to other parts of the world and now totals over 170 places. Even in the U.S., Yunus helped started a trust to teach people in the communities how to set up their own loan projects. Currently, Yunus is working with Results, an international grass-roots organization, to ask for help from the countries around the world.

Muhammad Yunus's contribution to the world has earned him honors around the world. In 2009, President Barrack Obama of the U.S. presented Yunus with a Presidential Medal of Freedom and most honored of all, Yunus was given a Noble Peace Prize in 2006.⁸ He is credited with developing the concepts of microcredit and microfinance. Taking the issue close to home, in 2009, Yunus opened a research institute in Thailand with the main purpose of researching how to help solve the poverty problem in Southeast Asia. But perhaps the honor dearest to Yunus's heart is his labor for the love of the poor people. His far-reaching vision of giving a chance to people who did not have a fair chance to better themselves in life has made an inroads into many people's consciousness. Though it is a labor that will never cease to end, Yunus felt an inner gratification for undertaking it. It also illustrates the concept that the more you give, the more you will receive. The result of his work will be felt for

years to come, as small businesses now have a chance to be free from the dominance of multi-national companies. Local communities now have a chance to choose to develop their own businesses and meet the needs of the people.

THE SPIRITUAL BENEFIT OF THE SISYPHEAN TASK AND ITS RELEVANCE TO VESAK DAY AND TO RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

Perseverance is an integral part of our virtuousness. Although other human qualities such as generosity, moral conduct and patience are parts of being a virtuous man, without perseverance, human beings are considered lazy. It is very easy to fall back and find excuses for not persisting when difficult circumstances come our way. The ability to push through our negative thoughts of not wanting to practice dharma teachings is needed to overcome laziness. Dharma is not useful by just knowing the concepts, but you need to practice it continuously even in times when you feel tired and listless. By not practicing dharma, you will be caught in negative thoughts about problems in your life, without accomplishing virtue and benefiting others.

By possessing perseverance, we can increase our virtuous qualities without being distracted or obscured. Our mind will be calm and peaceful, and not disturbed by our emotions. We keep our mind in the present and care not about the past nor fear the future. We learn to let go of our ego, even though we still converse with ourselves. Because the self is the basis of our suffering, by not clinging to it we can make our mind free. Letting go of our ego requires wisdom and compassion. Because the process of letting go of our ego requires time, we need to persevere in the path that we are in. During the process of trying to focus one's mind, one will sometimes be distracted or tempted by laziness, however, it is important to keep one's resolve. If you have perseverance you will achieve enlightenment quickly.⁹

What is the real meaning of perseverance in spiritual context? It's the feeling of inner happiness knowing that you are undertaking a virtuous task. This feeling will come upon you when you truly understand and absorb dharma teachings. You will feel motivated and joyful in practicing dharma, because you know the cause of peace and the cause of suffering. Excuses will not arise in your mind because you are not being forced into doing it. The Compendium of Abhidharma says that perseverance is the antidote to laziness, delighting in

virtue.¹⁰ Because laziness is an obstacle to enlightenment, it is necessary to have perseverance to counter the feeling of laziness.

The Vesak Day and Buddhist-Sisyphian Perseverance: The word “Sisyphian task” can be illustrated in terms of the perseverance by the Buddha during his striving for enlightenment. Pertaining to the “Visakhabucha Day”, the day The Buddha was born, enlightened and died, the perseverance of the Buddha relates to the hardships he had to undergo to discover the truth about life. As Prince Siddhartha at the age of 29, he witnessed the cycle of old age, suffering, and death, and came to realize that it affected everyone. But many were ignorant of this cycle of life. So, Siddhartha decided to leave all his worldly belongings and comfort behind to search for the real meaning of life. During Siddhartha’s path to enlightenment, he took the path of physical perseverance by fasting. It was a common method that other religious practitioners before him had practiced and was considered the most testing spiritual regimen at that time. Yet he found that the way of starvation was too extreme and did not bring peacefulness to the mind. Physical perseverance was not the answer to why the cycle of life existed and how we could be free from it. Therefore, he decided to abandon this practice and went back to eating food normally.

After Siddhartha started eating again till his body recovered, he undertook the process of mental perseverance. For six years, he meditated until he realized that he was nearing the attaining of full enlightenment. He then walked to a tree that would later become known as the Bodhi Tree. Seating himself under the tree, he vowed not to rise from meditation until he had achieved enlightenment. With this determination he entered the space-like concentration on the Dharmakaya.¹¹

As Siddhartha sat meditating, Devaputra, the chief of all demons, tried to distract his concentration by conjuring up terrifying images. Some images were of demons throwing weapons, rocks and mountains at him and some were of demons trying to burn him with fire. But with his unwavering concentration, the weapons and rocks appeared to him as a rain of fragrant flowers and the fire turned into rainbow lights. After seeing that Siddhartha could not be frightened or distracted in his meditation, Devaputra tried to use images of beautiful women to lure Siddhartha out of his concentration. Instead of being tempted, Siddhartha went into even deeper concentration until he conquered

all demons of this world. After passing through the test against the demons, he mediated until dawn and finally achieved full enlightenment.

The attainment of enlightenment is considered the second important happening on Visakhabucha Day. It was comparable to the second birth of Siddhartha, for the first birth was to be born as human, but enlightenment was like being reborn. It was a birth that was complete and free from all temptation, demons, sufferings, or even happiness. Siddhartha persevered to achieve this state on his own will without being ordered from anyone or willed by any divine being. He did it as a normal human being who persisted in his quest to be free from all suffering.

The Application to Religious Dialogue: Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks facing anyone is the task of trying to bridge the faiths and beliefs of different people from different backgrounds. The clash of belief of the many religions around the world have led to many conflicts.

The Example of Raimon Panikkar: Raimon Panikkar is a Roman Catholic priest and a scholar who advocated inter-religious dialogue. He dedicates his life and work to the near-impossible task of trying to building bridges between different religions and cultures. He is well-known for his inter-faith and inter-cultural dialogue. He strongly believes that culture cannot be understood unless you have been living in that culture and not until you are seeing the world from the perspective of that culture. What this means is that you must learn to accept all cultures and that everyone is his or her own most complete source of knowledge of oneself. He further advocates that nothing is permanent, no theory or view is the absolute truth. All points of view depend on the context, time, and place.

Panikkar also has his own view on religions and cultures. His mother was a Catholic Catalan and his father was a Hindu Indian. He grew up living a life of two different worlds for many centuries. At one stage, he was living half a year in India, and teaching at a university in California the other half of the year. He proclaims himself a Christian, a Hindu, a Buddhist, and also an atheist, meaning that he accepts all faiths. In his own words, he mentions that “I left (Europe) as a Christian; found myself a Hindu; and I return as a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian”. His experience of Christian-Hindu, Christian-Buddhist and Christian-Secularist dialogue help form his method for

interreligious dialogue and intercultural encounter. For Panikkar, inter-faith dialogue helps raise new human and religious consciousness. To be able to do this, you don't have to abandon your own faith, but you just have to deepen and extend it. He develops his rules for religious encounter, by emphasizing that you should not merely try to defend your own religion, you should be open to the truth of other religions. He further points out that religions must not be limited by past teachings, but must be able to adapt the teachings to the modern world. In regard to cultures, Panikkar opposed the notion of one culture's superiority to another culture, and that the view of one culture can be applied everywhere.

Panikkar also has his own view on science. Even though he received a doctorate degree in science, Panikkar views that modern science is based on belief, hypothesis, and principles that don't relate to the experience of the local natives and cultures. Modern science, to him, is not based on neutrality and is not truly global. It is mainly based on the use of technology and wants man and the world to change and adapt to the rules of technology. Panikkar prefers to learn from the forests, rocks, mountains and rivers. He realizes that mother earth has its own life and soul, and that our own souls and minds are not coincidences but are parts of the reality of this world.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

From the examples of ordinary people to national leaders, the word "Sisyphean task" has been used to symbolize the struggle to perform a labor that seems to be unattainable and never-ending. The power of perseverance, as we term it, is the force that is behind the achievements of all these cases. Yet, what these cases have shown is that there is no limit to what human can overcome or undertake if he or she is willing to sacrifice and persevere in order to follow dreams or missions in life. The refusal to get frustrated by the circumstances and limitations imposed on them is what set them apart. Yet, we should realize that these individuals are not superheroes, but they are normal human beings just like the rest of us. It does not matter whether you are a man or a woman, rich or poor, from whatever background, hope springs eternally for those of us who are inspired to start a project and follow it to its end. To some, the inspiration comes from nothing but a sense of inner gratification to

help others without wanting anything in return. To others, the motivational factor is the responsibility to help their own people to be free from religious or political persecution. Some individuals performed their feats for the love of the fellow animals on this earth, while some did their jobs to help protect the environment. Many share the feeling to create an awareness and sense of justice to fight against inequality of all kinds.

The accomplishments that we have analyzed bring fame and recognition to some of these deserving recipients. But for many more, labors of love do not bring any monetary reward, or media coverage. But what these cases did bring is to raise awareness of the cause for the greater good and to instill social-consciousness in all of us. The “Sisyphean task” almost always requires sacrificing personal life and even means exile from home. These undertakings require years to be accomplished and most tasks will not be finished in the person’s own lifetime. Therefore, it is up to the next generation to carry on the work, all the while realizing that there is no limitation to what we can achieve as long as we possess the power of perseverance.

Visakhabucha Day reminds us of the Buddha’s own perseverance in his achievement of enlightenment. Though the physical part of being human is important, it is the mental side that is the dominant force. The true test of our body means that we must overcome our mind first. For no matter how difficult a task the body is asked to perform, this task can be accomplished if we have the right mental frame of mind. Practicing dharma can help us control our mind and understand the true meaning of life. It keeps us motivated and prevents us from falling into the mode of laziness. Perseverance of the mind is therefore an essential part of practicing dharma and countering laziness. The path to enlightenment may seem unattainable to most of us, but peaceful mind and inner joy from being virtuous can surely be reached.

Endnotes

¹อาณาจักรแห่งความพิชิต. <http://www.dhammadjak.net/book/payayam/payayam10.php>. (15 September 2010).

²www.sarakadee.com (15 September 2010).

³Christopher Titmus - Visionaries: The 20th Century’s 100 Most Important Inspirational Leaders, pg 235-239.

⁴Aung San Suu Kyi is the leader of Burma’s National League for Democracy,

her party won a landslide victory in 1990. (King, 2005, p. 8).

⁵<http://www.myhero.com/go/hero.asp?hero=dalilama>. (16 September 2010).

⁶http://www.thewip.net/contributors/2010/06/despite_tensions_tibetans_rema.html. (16 September 2010).

⁷He has won the Wallenberg Award, the Albert Schweitzer ward, and the Nobel Peace Prize. (King, 2005, p.9)

⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muhammad_Yunus. (17 September 2010).

⁹www.aboutbuddha.org/english/life-of-buddha-4.htm/. (17 September 2010).

¹⁰<http://medicinebuddhasangha.org/teachings/perseverance.html>. (17 September 2010).

¹¹www.aboutbuddha.org/english/life-of-buddha-4.htm/ (17 September 2010).

¹²http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_2/Hall.htm. (17 September 2010).

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