

# UNIVERSALISM AND ETHICAL HUMANISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF BHADANT ANAND KAUSALYAYAN

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## Abstract

The modern revival of Buddhism in India was much more than a simple religious revival. It was a major movement of intellectual and ethical renewal, responding to the challenges of modernity, inequality, and the growing fragmentation of cultures. Although the movement had many leading figures, Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan remains a somewhat underappreciated but no less influential figure. This article focuses on Kausalyayan's conceptions of universalism and ethical humanism, as embodied in his philosophical thinking, and places them in the larger context of modern Indian Buddhism. The article suggests that Kausalyayan provided a new, rational, and ethically-oriented reading of the Buddhist tradition. This reading allowed Buddhism to transcend the boundaries of sects and promoted a vision of human dignity, compassion, and equality. The study analyzes Kausalyayan's philosophical texts, translations of classical Buddhist literature, and his participation in the social-religious sphere, highlighting his contributions to the development of a modern humanistic Buddhism. The article will also examine how his ideas relate to current debates over interfaith dialogue, social justice, and global ethics.

**Keywords:** Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan, Universalism, Ethical Humanism, Modern Buddhism, Social Justice, Indian Philosophy

## 1. Introduction

The modern revival of Buddhism in India represents a critical moment in the intellectual and cultural evolution of the country. This revival of Buddhism was integrally connected to the processes of colonial modernity, social reform, and the pursuit of a more

egalitarian social order. Once marginalized in its land of birth, Buddhism re-emerged as a powerful ethical and philosophical tradition capable of dealing with the urgent problems of caste-based oppression, social inequality, and moral crisis. Within this revival movement, several philosophers were responsible for interpreting the Buddhist tradition in terms of modern sensibilities. Among them, Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan stands out for his emphasis on reason, accessibility, and ethical engagement.

Two primary themes characterize Kausalyayan's philosophical outlook: universalism and ethical humanism. He saw Buddhism not simply as one of the many religions present in a given society, but rather as a universal ethical system whose precepts apply to all humans. Moreover, Kausalyayan's emphasis on the humanistic dimensions of the Buddhist tradition focused primarily on compassion, equality, and the moral accountability of individuals. Therefore, this study aims to analyze these aspects of Kausalyayan's philosophy and show why they are so important in the context of modern Indian Buddhism and in the broader context of contemporary global discourse.

## **2. The Concept of Universalism in Kausalyayan's Thinking**

Universalism constitutes a principal feature of Kausalyayan's interpretation of Buddhism. He views the Dhamma as a universal truth that transcends the boundaries of caste, religion, nationality, and culture. For Kausalyayan, Buddhism is not merely one of many religions; it is a rational and ethical system that responds to the most basic of human conditions. Kausalyayan's Universalist outlook is based in the Buddha's teachings, which emphasize the universal nature of suffering and the potential for all beings to achieve liberation. Kausalyayan rejects the idea of religious exclusivism, and maintains that the universal ethical principles of Buddhism specifically compassion, non-violence, and truthfulness are equally applicable to all humanity. As such, he emphasizes that these values are not unique to any one group, but are required for the welfare of all humans. From this perspective, Kausalyayan's reading of Buddhism is consistent with a broader humanistic vision that seeks to bridge divisions and create unity.

Kausalyayan's universalism is also evidenced in his use of vernacular languages (specifically, Hindi) to convey the teachings of the Buddha. By making the teachings of the Buddha more accessible to a wider audience, Kausalyayan attempted to eliminate the distinctions between scholarly knowledge and layperson understanding. This effort is

indicative of Kausalyayan's commitment to inclusivity and to the notion that the Dhamma is to be available to all people regardless of their educational or social standing.

### **3. Ethical Humanism in Kausalyayan's Philosophy**

Ethical humanism is another component of Kausalyayan's philosophical thought fundamentally. He interprets Buddhism as a systematic body of ethics founded upon human experience and rational investigation as opposed to divine authority or metaphysical speculation. In Kausalyayan's view, the core of Buddhism consists of the promotion of moral conduct, compassion, and the elimination of suffering.

Kausalyayan's humanism is apparent in his interpretation of key concepts in the Buddhist tradition. He understands the concept of karma to be a moral cause-and-effect principle rather than a determinative law. Furthermore, he understands nirvana to be a state of mental and moral freedom rather than a transcendent or mystical state. This humanistic reinterpretation of Buddhism makes it relevant to daily life and stresses the importance of individual responsibility.

Moreover, Kausalyayan's emphasis on compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*maitri*) illustrate his humanistic focus. He views compassion and loving-kindness not simply as individual virtues, but as essential features of social relationships. In Kausalyayan's opinion, a just and harmonious society can only be constructed upon a foundation of reciprocal respect, empathy, and morally responsible behavior. As such, his philosophy extends from individual transformation to a broader social transformation.

### **4. Buddhism as a Philosophical System Concerned with Social Issues**

Kausalyayan's universalism and humanism are closely linked to his vision of Buddhism as a philosophical system concerned with social issues. He believes that Buddhism has a vital function to perform in addressing various social issues of our times, particularly those concerning inequality and injustice. His association with the ideas of Dr B.R. Ambedkar reinforced this perspective.

Although Kausalyayan did not participate in large-scale social-political movements, his writings and teachings indicate a strong interest in social reform. He

argued that the principles of Buddhism can serve as a foundation for creating a more equitable and humane society. His critique of social hierarchy and discrimination based on caste indicates his commitment to justice and equality.

Additionally, Kausalyayan advocated for integrating the moral principles of Buddhism into public life, suggesting that values such as compassion, non-violence, and truthfulness should guide social and political institutions. His rational and ethically-oriented reading of Buddhism aligns with the values of modern democracy, and demonstrates the continued applicability of Buddhism to contemporary society.

## **5. Interfaith Dialogue and Critique of Orthodoxy**

Another significant aspect of Kausalyayan's philosophical thought relates to his engagement in interfaith dialogue. While he was critical of certain aspects of Hindu orthodoxy, particularly those relating to caste and ritualism, he was not antagonistic towards these traditions. Rather, Kausalyayan sought to establish dialogue and mutual understanding between different religious traditions. He emphasized that all religions possess certain common ethical values and that these commonalities can serve as the basis for establishing greater harmony and cooperation. At the same time, he stressed the unique characteristics of Buddhism as a rational and egalitarian tradition. The balance of his perspectives reflects his commitment to both critical inquiry and cultural sensitivity.

## **6. Significance Today**

The ideas of universalism and ethical humanism developed by Kausalyayan are today highly relevant to the world. With the current state of affairs characterized by social inequality, conflict between religions, and moral ambiguity, Kausalyayan's reading of Buddhism can provide important insights. His emphasis on reason, compassion, and social responsibility provides a model for addressing contemporary problems. Additionally, his Universalist approach can contribute to the establishment of a shared ethical framework that transcends cultural and national borders. His humanistic approach to Buddhism can provide a foundation for contemporary discussions about human rights, social justice, and environmental ethics.

## 7. Conclusion

Bhadant Anand Kausalyayan's philosophy is a significant contribution to the revival of Buddhism in modern India. His emphasis on universalism and ethical humanism represent a re-reading of Buddhist philosophy that is simultaneously rooted in tradition and sensitive to modern concerns. By rendering Buddhism accessible and meaningful to a broad audience through his portrayal of Buddhism as a rational, ethical, and socially-engaged philosophy, he assisted in rendering it more relevant and accessible to a diverse population.

Although Kausalyayan's contributions may not have been recognized to the extent of other contemporaries, they continue to represent an important part of the intellectual and cultural history of modern Indian Buddhism. His work continues to provide valuable insights to scholars, practitioners, and anyone who wishes to understand the relationship between religion and human well-being/social harmony.

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