

# BUDDHIST ETHICS : SOME REFLECTIONS

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## Abstract

The unique trait of Buddhism lies in transforming and ethicization of human consciousness. This is possible through three pronged strategy of *silā*, *samādhi* and *praṣṣā*. The *Bodhisattva* is the highest ideal of Mahāyana Buddhism, and this is neither worldly happiness nor achievement of a transcendental position, rather here the entire life is devoted to the suffering humanity. Morality, in Buddhism, is practical and empirical enterprise not a *priority* derived from any metaphysical principle. *Brahmavihāra* refers to moral principles of Buddhism which includes loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. The salient features of Buddhist ethics incorporates human dignity, non-attachment, tolerance, non-violence and practical orientation. The *karunā*, *muditā* and *maitri* reflect eco-friendliness and this is the need of hour to overcome the problem of environmental pollution and ecological imbalance. We must have to realize the sameness and interdependence of man and nature, its intrinsic worth through destruction of ignorance. This deep rooted ignorance can be destroyed only by meditative insight (*pañña*), and thus by the rise of wisdom (*praṣṣā*), craving (*tanhā*) and ignorance (*avidyā*) both are destroyed.

## I

Buddhism is essentially a religion without any God or divine metaphysical principle. Its uniqueness lies in transforming and ethicization of human consciousness and thereby the entire

humanity. This is possible only through self-efforts (*Attakāra*) which involves three pronged strategy : ethical purification and practices (*Sīla*), contemplative attentiveness (*Samādhi*) to form an ethical attitude and developing an immaculate wisdom (*prajñā*). The Buddhist ethics since its inception has been reflective, critical and rational as opposed to the customary, dogmatic and ritualistic one. '*Ātma Dīpo Bhav*' is true rational enquiry and experienced truth which excludes religious conformity and any sort of authoritarianism. It allows the ethical agent to reflect on his conduct to find the underlying principles and reasons and this constitutes the autonomy of the moral agent. Moral virtues along with contemplative practices and dawn of wisdom bring freedom and happiness to the entire suffering humanity and thus Buddhist ethics culminates in altruism. Buddha talks about human perfection in ethical terms against the background of his radical doctrines of non-substantiality of soul (*anattā*), impermanence (*aniccā*), dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*), middle path (*majjhimāpatipadā*), salvation (*nibbāna*) through self-effort (*attakāra*) etc.<sup>1</sup> *Nibbāna* is considered to be a state of ultimate freedom happiness, peace and altruistic activities of love and compassion. In *Theravāda* Buddhism *nibbāna* is negatively defined as the appeasement of such psychological factors as defilement (*rāga, dosa* and *moha*), disposition (*samskāra*), grasping (*upadāna*) and cravings (*tanhā*). An *arahat*, an enlightened one, is the product of self-effort that being individualistic achievement. In Mahāyāna Buddhism ideal is *Bodhisattva* who devotes his entire life to the suffering humanity. The *Bodhisattva's* highest good is neither worldly happiness nor achievement of a transcendental position. His journey starts from appeasing egoistic passions to the dynamic attitude of altruistic compassion (*karunā*) till he brings freedom from suffering and ultimate deliverance to every suffering being. Buddha was physician rather than metaphysician as his method of overcoming the evil of suffering is therapeutic. For him, the ultimate good is not the goal of achieving ontological merger into

some kind of divinity, or realization of the identification of the personal self (*Ātman*) with universal metaphysical self (*Brahman*), but an achievement of moral perfection by overcoming the three root evils (*akuśalamūla*)- passion (*rāga*), aversion (*dosa*) and confusion (*moha*), which are embedded in our very existence and give rise to another evils.<sup>2</sup> He thus sees suffering as a result of human failings and finds its solution by self-effort only. Buddha by his four noble truths makes an attempt to diagnose the conditions of the human existence. He draws our attention to the hardest facts of our life-non-permanence (*anniccā*), non-substantiality (*anattā*) and suffering (*dukkhatā*) whose knowledge and understanding not only awakens one from dogmatic slumber but initiates one into a realistic and pragmatic solution of these existential problems.

Human being, in Buddhism, is not a metaphysical being, but a cognitive, psychological and above all an ethical being- *par excellence*. Here knowledge, reason, freedom, virtues, good and happiness are all constituents of ethically developed being. Morality is practical and empirical enterprise not *a priority* derived from any metaphysical principle. The salient features of Buddhist ethics can be formulated in this fashion : 1. It is clear, coherent and comprehensive in nature. 2. It is rational and so acceptable to all rational persons. 3. It is impartial and universalizable in spirit. 4. It is empirically grounded and it integrates moral thought and action. 5. There is an altruistic motivation towards the practice of the four moral principles called *Brahmavihāra* namely loving kindness (*maitti*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upeksā*). Buddha was well aware of the dangers of separation between morality (*sīla*) and insight or wisdom (*prajñā*) as morality without wisdom lacks true conviction and ends with mere rituals and formal adherence to moral rules. Whereas insight without morality leads to scepticism, moral passivity and exclusive egoism.<sup>3</sup> He advises the entire humanity to follow the middle path-the path of avoiding the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence. In ethical sphere, the middle path is the noble eight

fold path (*astāngikamārga*). Moral behaviour should not be blindly guided by the so called divine revelations, scriptures or holy teachers rather the foundation of morality is within the person himself, which is to be cultivated and developed. In Western perspective Kant similarly maintains that morality is always self-imposed and this he refers as 'moral law within.' Thus moral foundation does not lie in any religious, divine, legal or social commandments as we find in the Vedic, Judaeo- Christian and Islamic tradition. Morality is nothing but inter-personal behaviour or relationship and here the act of moral agent is to be evaluated. Ethicization of act (*karma*)- mental (*manasā*), vocal (*vācā*) and bodily (*deihika*) - is the prime concern of Buddhism, because only through it man can regulate favourably the moral causality (*karma-vipāka*), the world of action (*samsāra*), rebirth (*punarjanma*) and liberation (*nirvāna*). Early Buddhism is founded on *sīla*, *samādhi* and *prajñā*, while Mahāyana Buddhism is based on *prajñā*, *karunā* and *śūnyatā*, But both incorporate emotions evaluated by the cognitive and rational faculties in their ethical systems. Buddha introduced the concept of intention (*cetanā*) in respect of the moral agent. He considered it as the determining factor in the nature of *karma* and its fruition. It is the intentional act which determines the moral agent's journey from one birth to another and the quality of his life here and here after or complete freedom from the cycle of birth - death and rebirth. It is the concept of *cetanā* which represents agent's deliberate involvements, autonomy, free will and responsibility of deeds. The dependent origination diagnoses the causes and vicious process of suffering and substitutes the permanent self (*ātman*) with the dynamic process. It ethicises life, *karma* and rebirth and maintains enough scope for changing the direction of dynamic process through self-effort by meditation and ethical *karma*. It rules out the role of any external agency in the process and it presents a middle path between eternalism and annihilationism, moral relativism and absolutism. Finally, it rejects the two extremes of strict determinism and accidentalism. The

Buddhists maintain that the fruition of *karma* is inexorable and without fail. There may be a delay in *karmaphala* because of the delay in getting together all the necessary conditions but one is bound to reap the consequences of one's own act.

## II

The second noble truth maintains that suffering originates in craving (*tanhā*). In one sense, suffering is caused by craving, what one cannot have or craving to avoid what cannot be avoided. The deeper sense of craving involves a blind compulsion to be or have a self. There is no suffering until objective factors in the world are related to a self. The truth about the origin of suffering is that it is the craving of a self that gives rise to suffering. The third noble truth pertaining to the cessation of suffering lies in the extinction of that craving. Buddhist ideal of *Nibbāna* means blowing out and what is blown out-like a lamp or extinguished is selfish craving. The noble eight fold path as encapsulated in fourth noble truth include right views (*sammaditthi*), right resolution (*sammasamkalpa*), right speech (*samma, vāca*), right action (*sammakarmānta*), right livelihood (*sammaājīva*), right effort (*sammapyāyāma*), right mindfulness (*samma sati*) and right concentration (*sammasamādhi*). The various actions of life as proposed by it, aim to achieve a completely integrated life of the highest order. The axioms of ethical conduct include right speech, action and livelihood. The axioms of mental discipline have right effort, mindfulness and concentration. The axioms of wisdom encompass right views and right resolution. The purpose of ethical conduct (*sīla*) is to check the inflow of additional (new) cravings. Concentration (*samādhi*) aims at destroying the already present cravings, while wisdom (*prajñā*) is prescribed for living a sufferingless existence. Ethical conduct is both a reflection of and a condition for wisdom and discipline. Right speech means generally to avoid all talks that will lead to unhappiness and use speech to bring about happiness. Its negative

application includes : no lying, no slander or character assassination, or talk that may bring about hatred, jealousy, enmity or discord among others. Its positive implication teaches that one should tell the truth, speak in kindly and friendly manner, use the language meaningfully and usefully. Right action means avoiding killing and precludes stealing, cheating and immoral sexual activity. Positively it means that one's action should aim at promoting peace and happiness for others and respecting the well being of entire humanity. Right livelihood extends the principle of right action to one's chosen profession throughout and it simply means that it should not harm other like trading in firearms, liquors, drugs, killing, sexual procurement etc. Hence, only those of means of living which promote peace and well-being are in accord with this principle. Wisdom includes both the correct understanding of things as they are and the resolution to act in accord with this understanding. Understanding ourselves and the universe in which we live will culminate into universal love and compassion. Selfish desires, ill-will, hatred and violence are entirely given up when wisdom dawns. But wisdom cannot dawn without discipline, and therefore, one practices right effort, mindfulness and concentration. The compassion and love are the natural outcomes of a recognition of the interdependence and relativity of things. If no things have independent being (*svabhāva*), then they are dependent upon each other. Hence, ignorance and selfishness must be replaced by wisdom and compassion.

We are now in a position to delineate the prominent traits of Buddhist axiology :

**1. Emphasis on the dignity of man :** In Buddhism man is not subordinate to any natural or supra-natural entity. What greater dignity can be bestowed upon man than to recognize that he is the master of his own life and destiny. In theistic religion, on the contrary, man is subordinated to God and divine will prevails throughout the universe (theological determinism), whereas in materialistic culture man is often subordinated to things in the

world and sometimes subordinated even to his own artifacts (materialistic determinism). Buddhism strongly advocates the dignity of individual being and autonomy of moral agent.

**2. Non-attachment :** It is on account of Buddhist conviction that there are no enduring selves or things in the world, there is a feeling of non- attachment (*anāsakti*) either to his ego or to things in the world. Recognizing that impermanence is the mark of this world, he refuses to cling to absurd conception of permanence. As a result he is unruffled by change and suffering and faces the future with equanimity and does not lament over the surrounding situations.

**3. Tolerance :** Buddhism is a way of practical realization of truth by self-discipline and moral purification. It is for this reason Buddhism is tolerant to other religions and of differing individual interpretations of Buddhist teachings. It not only recognises but respects individual differences in all spheres of human life. Tolerance, in Buddhism, is bedrock of morality and its magnified form is universal love and compassion.

**4. Non-violence :** Violence is absolutely contrary to the teachings and practice of Buddhism. It advocates non-violence in all the three forms- speech, thought and action. It is common conviction of Buddhist everywhere that anger and violence only provoke more of the same and that they are appeased or removed only by kindness and compassion towards the sentient and non-sentient being. Mahatma Gandhi is deeply influenced by the Buddhist ethical principles of truth, non-violence and spirit of non-attachment.

**5. Practical Orientation :** Buddhism is considered to be an ancient Indian existentialist philosophical thought with pragmatic or practical orientation. Meditational practice produces the attitude that strikes an observer with practical or down-to-earth approach. When one is at peace with himself and not pulled by thousand desires and nagged by ten thousand doubts he can freely and

completely engage in the activities at hand. There can be no real happiness in brooding over the future which has yet to come. Nor can happiness be found in lamenting the past. Finally, we should live in the present and by self-effort (*attakāra*) attempt to achieve the ideal of liberation (*nibbāna*).

### III

The attempt will be made in this section to sketch how Buddhist ethics cares for preservation of nature. The proper analysis of *Buddha Vacana* gives rise to Buddhist environmental ethics. He always advocated the proper management of natural resources and, at the same time, emphasized on protection of nature from human encroachment. Buddha considered forest an ideal place for meditation. The moral precepts that emanate from Buddhist literature are cosmo centric in nature. The love kindness (*karunā*), joy (*muditā*) and friendliness (*māitri*) of Buddhist ethics reflect eco-friendliness and that is the need of hour to overcome the problem of environmental pollution and ecological imbalance. Normally, man is dependent on nature for his basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, medicine etc., and nature supplies these without any trouble. But when nature is exploited for nurturing the unbridled greed and wasted mercilessly, eco-crisis emerges. In order to prevent this, a crisis management of natural resources is needed. This management of nature implies two types of action plan : (a) need based use of natural resources; and (b) frugality.<sup>4</sup> Today, we are living in the age of consumerism, which has given rise to energy crisis and pollution problems. Due to vast hoarding and methodical destruction of large quantity of natural resources to feed our greed and ever evolving wants, the vast resources of fossil fuel and petroleum, which took million of years to form, have come to the point of near extinction. The dynamics behind this consumerism is human greed, lust, attachment and short sightedness, which prompt men to invent new commodities of



comfort, varieties of artificial pleasure and exciting adventure. Buddha is of the opinion that the environment (world) is the manifestation of intention (*citta*). Human intention (craving) is the cause of existence and constant renewal of the universe.<sup>5</sup> Our intentions or thoughts are dependent on our mental makeup. If it is polluted with lust, hatred and delusion (*lobha, dosa* and *moha*), '*akusalacitta*', it will translate itself into the external environment as complexes or physical life forms and material development based on exploitation of natural resources without moral restraint.<sup>6</sup> *Dhammapada* categorically says that the fools are not realizing the inherent painfulness of apparently pleasant object of the world, enjoy them like honey.<sup>7</sup> Similar is the case of present environmental problems. Mankind has exploited the nature for his pleasure and greed to such an extent that environment is polluted with disastrous consequences. Buddha has repeatedly advised not to nurse greed, as greed is the root cause of all evil and suffering. It is with the end of greed all sort of suffering is evaporated (*Tanhakhayosabbadukkhaminati*). In order to eradicate the greed it is essential to develop the positive quality of contentment (*santutthi*). A contented man is always happy with what he has got and his vision is non-exploitative. Hence, with limited wants he is neither harmful to nature nor create pollution by his act.

Buddha has condemned wasteful attitude towards nature as it is anti-social as well as criminal activity. The problem of waste and in turn pollution can be solved easily through Buddhist middle path (*MadhyamaMārga*). In the present situation, miserliness and wastefulness are two dangerous extremes. One should avoid these two extremes and adopt the middle path of frugality while using the natural resources. Man has to promote and protect the entire cosmic existence for two reasons : (a) if cosmic existence is not maintained we will be also destroyed and (b) we both (cosmos and man) are equally important and both are interdependent.<sup>8</sup> This is well exhibited by Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). But due to greed, hatred and delusion our

relation with nature and other beings got strained. For our enjoyment and greed we adopt an aggressive attitude towards nature. The positive aspect of Buddhist non-violence (*ahimsā*) presupposes cultivation of compassion and sympathy for all living beings. Buddhist ethics springs out of love, sympathy, compassion and respect for all life. Hence, the prime purpose of the Buddhist path is to regain the lost vision (*sammaditthi*), regarding the sameness and interdependence of man and nature, its inherent goodness etc., through destruction of ignorance. This deep-seated ignorance can only be destroyed by meditative insight (*panna*), and thus by the rise of wisdom, craving and ignorance both are destroyed.

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