

IMPORTANCE OF *DHAMMAPADA* IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

Being a part of Indian religion and culture the Buddhism contains various Indian thoughts, and values of life. In Buddhism one can find ancient Indian concepts of spiritual as well as social values which are relevant even today. The teachings of Buddha are not different from ancient Indian ethical values rather more closer and practical. As a part of Buddhist literature, the *Dhammapada* comprises many ethical values of life.

Key Words : Society, Ethics, Moral conduct, salvation, *nirvāṇa*, Buddhism, Highest good, *Dhammapada*, *pañcaśīla*. Meta ethics, normative ethics, applied ethics.

Introduction :

Society may be defined as human in groups in general. Nay, people lived in a large organised groups according to their social, political, economical, geographical or any other bond to meet the common aim i.e. to pass their life-span in the earth can be termed as 'Society'.¹In common parlance, the people living in India and their society can be termed as Indian Society. The modern Indian Society is a hybrid one consisting of many societies. The Vedas have been considered the roots of the Indian Society. Therefore Indian Society sincerely reflects various Vedic thoughts. In course of time many of these thoughts incorporated many new ideas. Buddhism, as a part of Indian society is also not exception to this fact. However, there exist diversities in Indian society. Similarly,

Buddhism differs from the Vedic religion. Buddhism emphasises upon Ethics whereas the Vedas Emphasise upon various actions like sacrifice, meditation while advancing towards the goal of life.

Ethics² is the backbone of humanity. Ethics can be better understood by the terms like morality or moral conduct, moral behaviour etc. Morality is an important human faculty that leads people to mould an ideal world where there is only peace and pleasure can be accessed. It has been believed right from the beginning that only moral conducts of the people may ensure long life to the society. Undoubtedly it is true that without morality no people can survive. Hence a class of people pursue morality and it is in fact true that the other class of people (non-moral) also survive on account of such followers of moral conducts. Being a synonym of morality 'ethics' means a branch of Philosophy that deals in systematic study of defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct.

Ethics Explained :

The western term 'ethics' comes from the Greek word 'éthikós' meaning 'relating to one's character' which is originally derived from the root word 'ethos' meaning character, moral nature'. According to other 'ethics' has been derived from Greek 'ethos' (character) and Latin 'mores' meaning custom.³

Thus ethics is concerned with the human conducts. It examines what is morally right and morally wrong, what is just and what is unjust, what is morally good and what is morally bad and so on. Ethics studies and establishes those principals which are beneficial to human society at large.⁴

Socrates (470-399 BC.) is regarded as the father of modern ethics. Right from the beginning of Socratic Philosophy, the western view on ethics also developed and later it evolved into a separate subject of Philosophy.

Scope of Ethics :

From the point of view of modern study, Ethics as a science of philosophy discusses the subject matter of moral consciousness and its various problems. It is related to the highest good. It is concerned with the judgement on people's voluntary actions. Various spontaneous human acts, principles, effects of actions are also included into the scope of Ethics. It also deals with the nature, object, faculty, standard of moral judgement, moral sentiment to moral judgement of the people and so on and so forth. All these aforementioned scopes can be divided into three main categories.

- i. The theoretical analysis of moral propositions. This portion of ethics can be considered as Meta-ethics.
- ii. Various processes of ethical actions that examine certain questions which arise in considering one's action and comparing its authenticity towards ideal morality. This part is called Normative ethics.
- iii. The ideal morality has been exercised in the society right from the beginning of the mankind. This practical ethics can be considered as Applied ethics.

Indian view on Ethics :

India occupies a prominent place in the educated world for its rich literary history. It is very interesting to mention here that Indian society from very down has been familiar with some terms expressing moral principles or conducts because of the fact that the Vedas have ample evidences of such terms or concepts. For example, *dharmā* (righteousness), *satya* (truth), *mānuṣam* (humanly behaviour) etc. give us a distinct concept of moral conduct. Later on, in Sanskrit language, the term '*nīti*' comes forward to mean ethics which is derived from the root √ *nī* meaning 'to lead' with the suffix '*ktin*'. Thus it means 'to lead' (us towards the goal of life). It also simply means rule and regulation. The word *nīti* has also

been used in Sanskrit literature as a synonym of polity viz. *rājanīti*, *daṇḍanīti* etc. because of the fact that the ethics lying behind there⁵. One may find many treatises discussing on *nīti* in post Vedic literature such as *smṛti* literature, epics, prose and fiction etc. where the ethics occupied an important place. Some other treatises like Bhartrihari's *Nītiśataka*, Vishnusarmā's *Pañcatantra*, Nārāyaṇa's *Hitopadeśa* etc. contain a lot of ethical principles from the point of view of social context. Thus it can be considered that although not directly, but side by side, the whole Sanskrit literature deals with the ethics at all. It seems that on the basis of this concept of ethics modern Indian ethics i.e. *nītiśāstra* has been developed. However, no separate old text on *nīti* has been found till date which deals in the sense of modern ethics.

The Concept of Ethics in the Vedas and Upaniṣads:

Obviously the Indian society is based upon the Vedas. The Vedas are considered as the oldest literature⁶ ever found in the world can be dated back roughly to 1700-1100 BC. Right from the beginning of the Vedas the Vedic morality has been also began. Hence it can be considered as the oldest moral thought ever recorded. It is noteworthy to mention here that the Vedas are the container of all grains. Hence from the point of view of philosophical thought also, the Vedas are considered the seeds of its plants such as *Sāṃkhya*, *Nyāya*, *Yoga* etc. The Upaniṣads are regarded the sprouts of that seeds which are more explicit than the *Mantra*, *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka* portions of the Vedas.

Morality as an integral part of philosophy developed side by side of the same and later it come out separately and established itself as *Nītiśāstra*, the science of moral conduct. However, only a very little number of treatises deal with *Nītiśāstra* as a moral science from the modern point of view.

All the Upaniṣads categorically emphasise upon the moral conducts of the onlooker of the *Brahman* or Supreme truth. Man is a

creation of both good and bad conducts. But the person who wants to achieve the knowledge of Supreme Self he must wash off his bad habits and mental impurities before starting his journey towards the Supreme reality.⁷

Concept of Ethics in Buddhism:

Buddhism arises as a consequence of sorrow which encountered with Gautama Buddha's life. Gautama Buddha (c.563/480-c. 483/400 BCE)⁸ founded Buddhism after his achievement of *Bodhi* (enlightenment). He was born to a Hindu *Kshatriya* family and thus it seems that he was aware of Upaniṣadic ethics of those days. Although Gautama did not emphasise the Hindu canons such as the Vedas and Upanisads yet his teachings are not far away from Hindu ethics. Thus for example, it has been mentioned earlier that the Upanishads emphasises upon the performance of moral conduct before starting the journey towards liberation. Similarly, Buddhism also focuses upon the performance of morality before going to search for *nirvāṇa*, the salvation. However, both religions believe in different concept of salvation. According to Buddhism *nirvāṇa* can be achieved in the earthly life before one's death. Contrary to it, Hinduism holds that one can attain liberation only after his death. In this regard it is mention worthy that both these religion are in accord that salvation means freedom from rebirth.

It is interesting to note here that the Buddhist canon was not formed by Gautama Buddha himself. In fact, it was formed by Gautama Buddha's followers at the First Council and *Tipiṭaka* was written at the end of the First Council⁹. However, the canonical laws of Buddhism are not other than the maxims of Gautama and other Buddhist saints regarding life and its liberation. The *Tipiṭaka* and its ancillary texts mainly emphasise upon moral conducts. While pursuing *nirvāṇa* one must follow the five precepts (*pañcaśīla*) in his day to day life and Gautama Buddha showed eight

constituents (*aṣṭāṅgikamārga*) to get rid of the sufferings. As mentioned above, Buddhism aims at liberation of life. In Buddhism Ethics is the objective towards the achievement of liberation. Buddhism can be counted as a practical philosophy. Gautama Buddha was obviously a realist and he believed in Humanism. He advocated welfare not only of man but also of all beings. His teachings proclaimed welfare of all creatures. In Buddhism, all moral conducts have been included into *pañcaśīla* (five precepts). These are as follows:

1. The precept to abstain from killing.
2. The precept to abstain from stealing or taking anything which is not freely given.
3. The precept to abstain from adultery.
4. The precept to abstain from lying.
5. The precept to abstain from intoxicants and gambling.¹⁰

There are three additional precepts also. These are as follows:

- i. The precept to abstain from taking food at inappropriate time.
- ii. The precept to abstain from entertainment like dancing, singing etc. and items used for the beautification of any person.
- iii. The precepts to abstain from high and luxurious beds for sleeping.¹¹

It is mention worthy that the 'moral conduct' for Buddhist differs according to whether it applies to the laity or to the *sangha* or clergy.¹² This article modestly attempts to study the moral conducts of Buddhism from the point of view of modern ethics with special reference to the *Dhammapada*, i.e. a text of Theravada Buddhism.

The Dhammapada :

The *Dhammapada* is a collection of *Gāthā*¹³s intended to teach moral lessons to common people. It is a part of the *Khuddaka Nikāya* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* consisting of 423 verses in Pāli language¹⁴. Being a part of Buddhism, the *Dhammapada* contains ethical elements in its each and every verse.

The compound *Dhammapada* is derived from the words *dhamma* and *pada*. Both words have been come from the Sanskrit words *dharma* and *pada* respectively. Both have many denotations and connotations in Indian society¹⁵. In Buddhism the term *dhamma* refers to the doctrine of Buddha “or an eternal truth or righteousness or all phenomena and ...*pada* means foot and thus by extension, especially in this context means either path or verse or both.”¹⁶It is not amiss to mention Radhakrishnan here in this regard who explains the *Dhammapada* as “*Dhamma* is discipline, law, religion; *pada* is path, means (*upāya*), way (*magga*). *Dhammapada* is thus the path of virtue.”¹⁷According to *Mahāvamsā*, Tipiṭakas were composed finally for the first time in the time of Sinhale King Vattagāmaṇi (88-76 BC)¹⁸. According to Goswami, the *Dhammapada* became famous after Buddha’s demise and coded into scripts and got completeness in 300 BC. in the time of King Asoka¹⁹.

Ethical Elements in the *Dhammapada* :

The main aim of Gautama Buddha was to eliminate the path of liberation from sufferings of the world. Buddha intended his teachings to be tested, not accepted as dogma.²⁰ The *Dhammapada* was designed to show the right way towards salvation. Therefore it teaches practical actions to be used in day to day life. From the point of view of Modern ethics, the *Dhammapada* contain mainly the normative ethics and applied ethics rather than the meta ethics. However meta ethics also can be found in the *Dhammapada* verses. As mentioned earlier, meta ethics deals with the theoretical analysis of the moral proposition and the *Dhammapada* verses also

categorically refers to the moral theorem such as *appamāda* i.e. errorless mind, *sādhucittam* i.e. wise mind or controlled mind etc. One who sustains firm thought and perfection, sincere activeness towards his duty is called *appamatta*, the perfect one. The exercise of *appamāda* is an important instruction of Gautama Buddha. In this connection one may refer to Benimadhav Baruah²¹ who states 'Apramada was the root principle or basic idea of Buddha's teachings. The *Dhammapada* analyses this proposition in its chapter titled as *Appamādavaggo* in twelve verses. Thus for example, *Apamādavaggo* 1-3 state as follows:

Apramādaḥamṛtapadampramādomṛtyoḥpadam /
Apramattāhnamriyante ye pramāttahyathāmṛtāḥ //
Etamviśeṣataḥjnyātvāapramāde hi paṇḍitāḥ /
Apramādepramodanteāryānāmṅocareratāḥ //
Tedhyāyinaḥsātatikāḥnityamdrhaparākramāḥ /
Sprśyantidhīrāḥnirvāṇamyogakṣemamanuttaram //

It means, Vigilance is the abode of eternal life, thoughtlessness is the abode of death. Those who are vigilant (who are given to reflection) do not die. The thoughtless are as if dead already. The wise who have clearly understood this reflectiveness delight in reflectiveness and rejoice in the knowledge of the Āryas. These wise ones, meditative, preserving, always putting forth strenuous effort attain to *nirvāna*, the highest freedom and happiness.²² Similarly, the proposition *sādhucittam* has been explained in its *Cittavaggo*. Thus it is clear that the meta ethics can be found in *Buddhism*.

As mentioned earlier, the normative ethics is concerned with the standards for the rightness and wrongness. The *Dhammapada* refers such standards such as:

Na pareṣāmvilomānīnapareṣāmkṛtākṛtāni /
Ātmanaḥevaavekṣetakṛtāniakṛtāni ca // [*pupphavaggo*, 7]

It means, Not the unworthy actions of others, not their (sinful) deeds of commission or omission, but one's own deeds of commission and omission should one regard.²³

According to *Dhammapada*, virtuous person never falls from his way. Thus the verse states:

*Teṣāmsampannasīlānāmapramādavihāriṇām /
Samyakajñyāvimuktānāmāromārgamnavindati //*
[pupphavaggo,14]

[Of those who possess these virtues, who live without thoughtlessness, who are freed by perfect knowledge, Māra the tempter never finds their way.]²⁴

Nirvāṇa refers to the great Happiness. It is the great wealth. The followers of Buddha attempt to perform the duties and vows perfectly so that they become enable to get *nirvāṇa*. The *Dhammapada* advises to its disciples to make friendship with good people so that one should get his goal of life: In the Chapter titled *Paṇḍitavaggo* there are several instances of the same. Thus for instance:

*Nidhīnāmivopravaktāramyampaśyetvarjyadarśinam /
Nigrhyavādinammedhāvinamtādrśampaṇḍitambhajet /
Tādrśambhajamānaścaśaikṣyaḥbhavatīnapāpīyān //*
[paṇḍitavaggo,1]

[If a person sees a wise man who reproaches him (for his faults), who shows what is to be avoided, he should follow such a wise man as he would a revealer of hidden treasures. It fares well and not ill with one who follows such a man]²⁵

Similarly,

*Yeṣāmsambodhiangeṣusamyakacittamsubhāvitam /
Ādānapratinihsagreanupādānāya ye ratā /
kṣīnasravādutimantaḥtelokeparinivṛtāiti. //* [paṇḍitavaggo, 14]

[Those whose minds are well grounded in the (seven) elements of enlightenment, who without clinging to anything rejoice in freedom from attachment, whose appetites have been conquered, who are full of light, attain *nirvāṇa* in this world.]²⁶

The applied ethics refers to the practical application of moral behaviours. In modern concept it can be practised in private and public life. In Buddhism too there are some ethics which can be used in public and private life. These ethics can be termed as applied ethics in Buddhism. The applied ethics also can be traced in the verses of the *Dhammapada* when it explains various moral conducts to abstain from harmful deeds and so on. Thus for example,

*Sukhaṃvatajīvāmaḥvairiṣuavairinaḥ /
vairiṣumanuṣyeṣuviharāmaḥavairinaḥ // [sukhavaggo, 1]*

[Let us live happily then, hating none in the midst of men who hate. Let us dwell free from hate among men who hate.]²⁷

The life of a person is surrounded by envy, enmity, worldly pursuits etc. All these are the results of the covetousness, thirst, anger, malice etc. One who overtakes all these he only is the possessor of *nirvāṇa*. Thus the verse of the *Dhammapada* states:

*Nāstirāgasamaḥagniḥnāstidveṣasamaṃkalih /
Nāstiskandhasamaṃduḥkhaṃnāstīśāntiparaṃsukhaṃ //
[sukhavaggo,6]*

It means, There is no fire like passion, no ill like hatred, there is no sorrow like this physical existence (individuality), there is no happiness higher than tranquillity.²⁸

Over and above, the *Dhammapada* contains Buddhist ethics in a broader sense which are applicable in modern time also. Being a base or foundation of religion *Dhammapada*²⁹ reveals experimental

ethics. Each and every teaching of Buddha is practical. According to Buddhist teachings, the ethical and moral principles are governed by examining whether a certain action, whether connected to body or speech is likely to be harmful to one's self or to others and thereby avoiding any actions which are likely to be harmful³⁰. It is an astonishing fact that Gautama Buddha propagated moral conduct as a mean of highest happiness more than twenty five hundred years ago which is relevant even today. It is mention worthy here in this context that Indian penal code owes its roots to the five precepts of the Buddhism.³¹ However it is not sufficient to reform the present society.

Conclusion :

Thus from the discussion above it can be ascertained that the Buddhist teachings are concerned with all the ethical aspects of human behaviour and human desire. Hence the Buddhist morality is concerned with the social benefit. It never asks to give up ethical part of the personality while uniting the *nirvāna*, the freedom from suffering.

From the modern point of view also, today's society is in need of such ethical principles in its every walk of life. It is the time to re-think, research and follow the Buddhist ethics to get rid from the turmoil of the present society. Only ethics can guide us towards an ideal society in future. In this context the ethics mentioned in the *Dhammapada* seems to be very helpful. The Buddhist ethics has the quality to reform the society with the co-operation of other Indian ethics.

Notes :

¹ Cf., <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society>

² Cf., *ibid.*>Ethics

³ Cf., *Introduction to Nature and Scope of Ethics*, m.kkhsou.in

⁴ Cf., *ibid.*

- ⁵ Cf., Sir, Williams, M. M., *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1960, p. 565.
- ⁶ Cf., Max Muller, *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, London, 1860, p.63.
- ⁷ Cf., *Kathopaniṣad*, 2.24.
- ⁸ CF., *Gautama Buddha*, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>.
- ⁹ Cf., Radhakrishnan, S., *The Dhammapada*, Madras, Fifth impression, 1977, pp. 1-2.
- ¹⁰ Cf., Devi, Rupshree, *Buddhism and Humanism*, Dhing, Nagaon, December, 2014, p. 67.
- ¹¹ Cf., *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
- ¹² Cf., *Ibid.*, p.57.
- ¹³ *Gāthā* means any Prakrit and Pali verses in general and specially the versified portions of *Tipitaka* into Sanskrit in Āryā meter.
- ¹⁴ Present article will consider the Sanskrit version of the *Dhammapada* for citing examples. There are other versions of *Dhammapada* such as *Gāndhārī Dhammapada*, *Patna Dhammapada*, *Dhammapada* in Sanskrit version, *Dhammapada* in Chinese language etc. See Also, Radhakrishnan, s., *Ibid.*, p.2.
- ¹⁵ In Hinduism, *Dharma* signifies duties, rights, laws, righteousness, virtues etc, In Jainism, *Dharma* signifies the teachings of the Tirthankaras, In Sikhism, *Dharm* refers to the path of righteousness and proper religious practice. See Also, *Dharma*, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>.
- ¹⁶ Cf., *Dhammapada*, <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>
- ¹⁷ Cf., Radhakrishnan, S., *op. cit.*, p.1
- ¹⁸ Cf., Goswami, Satyendranarayan, *Dhammapada*, Ed. and Tr. (Assamese) Tihu and Guwahati, 1990, p19.
- ¹⁹ CF., *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Cf., Neeman, Or., *Theravāda Buddhism and John Dewey's Metaethics*, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Vol.17, 2010, p.163 (<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>)
- ²¹ As cited by Goswami, Satyendranarayana, *op. cit.*, p22.
- ²² As translated by Radhakrishnan, on *Appamādavaggo* 1-3.

- ²³ As translated by Radhakrishnan, on *Pupphavaggo* 7. See, Radhakrishnan, S., *op. cit.*, p. 76.
- ²⁴ As translated by Radhakrishnan S, *op. cit.*, p.77.
- ²⁵ Cf., *Ibid.*, p.84
- ²⁶ Cf., *Ibid.*, p.87.
- ²⁷ Cf., *ibid.*, p.124.
- ²⁸ Cf., *Ibid.*, p.126.
- ²⁹ Cf., *Ibid.*, p.1
- ³⁰ Cf., Devi Rupashree, *op. cit.*, p.57.
- ³¹ Cf., *Ibid*, p.84.

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