

# Practical Application of Ethical Values in Buddhist Philosophy – A Critical Approach

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**Abstract:** Buddhist ethics are traditionally based on what Buddhists view as the enlightened perspective of Buddha, or other enlightened beings such as Bodhisattvas. The Indian term for ethics or morality used in Buddhism is one of three sections of the Noble Eightfold path, and is a code of conduct that embraces a commitment to harmony and self-restraint with the principal motivation being nonviolence, or freedom from causing harm. Ethics of Buddhism refers to a way living the right life, both theoretically as well as practically. Buddha himself explained the pragmatic attitude to his disciples. The fact that the Buddha renounced the world when his heart was overwhelmed at the sight of suffering, pain, disease and death itself goes to prove that his main concern was the redemption of suffering of humanity. The Four Noble Truths the Arya satyas are the foundation of Buddhism. Taken as a whole, the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eight-Fold path are emblematic of all the Buddha's teachings. The four Noble Truths are woven throughout all of the Buddhist worlds. The Eight-Fold Path, too is representative of the path to enlightenment. Buddhist philosophy is basically practical in its approach. Buddha himself had attained nirvana or liberation. He has given the cause as well as remedy in form of eight-fold path for human suffering. Therefore, his analysis of human condition is practical and complete.

**Keywords:** self-restraint, liberation, moral conduct, practical, karma.

## 1. Introduction

Ethics (nitisastra) is a branch of philosophy that deals with moral values. The word 'ethics' come from the Greek 'ethikos' which means a set of mind principles. The moral code of the principle is a guide of their social and spiritual ways of life. The true essence of human life is to live surrounded by worldly joy and sorrows. Ethics is primarily concerned with the moral issues of the world. A true knowledge of ethics would be attained if one practices and absorb these moral values. The importance of ethics and ethical values is highlighted in epics and philosophical texts like Upanishads, Ramayana, Darshana-Sastras and Dharma sastras. The Darshana – sastras are philosophical texts, which provide rational explanations of the ethical issues; the universal problems faced by man in daily life are placed in a philosophical context. In the dharma-sastras, concentration is on the social ethics. Buddhism also gives primary importance to ethics. The ethical values in this faith are based on the life and teachings of the Buddha. According to

Buddhism, the foundation of ethics is Pancasila. (Five rules) which advocates refraining from killing, stealing, lying, sexual, misconduct, and intoxicants. Buddhist ethics are based on knowledge of the relation between one's intentional actions (physical, mental and verbal) and their consequences. From a Buddhist perspective, morality is based on the purification of the mind. Buddhist ethics can be said to be Karma based. Buddhist insights and their ethical frameworks contain common values that are effective tools for everyone who wishes to work together to mending the moral framework of society lesson human suffering, and replace the natural world. Buddhist ethics are traditionally based on what Buddhists view as the enlightened perspective of Buddha, or other enlightened beings such as Bodhisattvas. The Indian term for ethics or morality used in Buddhism is one of three sections of the Noble Eightfold path, and is a code of conduct that accept a dedication to harmony and self-restraint with the principal motivation being nonviolence, or freedom from causing harm. The core of Buddhism is composed of the ethical principles and precepts as well as the values and virtues expounded by Buddha [1].

### A. Guidance to Buddhist Ethics

In the Philosophy of the Buddha, we have a systematic study of ethical concepts and theories as well as positive directions to lead a way of life. This way of life is considered both possible and desirable because human and the universe are just what they are. The well-being of mankind is another end considered to be of supreme, though relative, value in the Buddhist texts and this well-being and happiness is conceived of as both material and spiritual welfare. Morality in Buddhism is essentially practical in that it is only a means leading to the final goal of ultimate happiness. The theory of Buddhist ethics finds its practical expression in the various precepts. These precepts or disciplines are nothing but general guides to show the direction in which the Buddhist ought to turn to on his way of liberation. Buddhist ethical values are essentially a part of nature, and the constant law of cause and effect. The simple fact that Buddhist ethics are rooted in natural law makes its principles both useful and acceptable to the modern world as well.

The basic teachings of Buddha which are core to Buddhism are (1) The three Universal truth, (2) The four Noble truth (3) The Noble Eightfold path. Buddhism also gives primary

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importance of ethics. In Buddhism the two most important ethical virtues are compassion (karuna) and friendliness (maitri). One should have deep sympathy and good will for the suffering people and should have the qualities of a good friend. The most important ethical values are non-violence or non-injury to all living beings. Buddhist ethics is based on four noble Truths. The whole of teachings of the Buddha is summed up in four noble truths. These are (1) There is a Suffering (2) There is a cause of suffering (3) Suffering can be stopped (4) There is a specific way to stop that suffering (through eight-fold path.)

- 1) There is a suffering: The first noble truth is the presence of suffering or pain: Birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair is painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting one's wishes is painful [2].
- 2) There is a cause of Suffering: The second noble truth about the cause of suffering. The chain of twelve links. Buddhism pointed out that ignorance was the cause of human suffering. Buddha's Second noble truth gives in depth analysis of the fact of human condition namely suffering.
- 3) Suffering can be stopped: The third noble truth about the cessation of suffering. The third noble truth that is total stopping of suffering follows from the 2<sup>nd</sup> noble truth that says misery depends upon some conditions. Commenting on the cause of suffering in the Buddhist ethics Radhakrishnan writes: 'Ignorance is the main cause out of which false desire springs when knowledge is attained, suffering is at an end. Ignorance and false desire are the theoretical and the practical sides of the one fact' [3]. The cessation of pain according to which he declared that the cessation of suffering is also a fact. The cessation of pain according to him, is implied in the admission of the cause of pain. This is the reason the Buddha proceeds with the fourth noble truth of the way to bring about the liberation, or Nirvana.
- 4) There is a specific way to stop that Suffering: The fourth noble truth discusses the way towards Liberation or Nirvana. After Buddha had attained nirvana enlightened heart filled with compassion for all those beings who were still suffering in pain. The eight-fold path consists of moral conduct, concentration and insight. It consists of eight steps so it is called as eight-fold path. This gives the essence of Buddhas ethics.

The knowledge of the four-noble truths came to the Buddha not automatically, but after he had practiced a life of righteousness. According to Buddhism, as according to all other schools of Indian Philosophy, Mere theoretical knowledge is not enough for the attainment of perfection. The ethical life means the practice of virtue, not only a nodding acquaintance with it. The Buddha works out the details of the ethical life and lays down the eight-fold path for the guidance of the aspirant. This is the noble eight-fold way; namely Right views, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right

effort, Right mindfulness, Right concentration.

### B. *Ashtangamarga (Eight-fold path)*

Ethics is defined as systematic understanding of moral concepts and justifies the theories and principles of right behaviour that guides individual and group on how to behave in the society. According to Peter Singer: "An ethical issue is relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face" [4].

1. Right Views: Samyagdristi - Right view means knowledge of four noble truths. It is knowledge of these truths alone, and not only theoretical speculation regarding nature and self helps in moral reformation and enhancement.
2. Right Resolve: Samyagsankalpa - Right Resolve refers to a strong determination to reform life in the light of the truth.
3. Right Speech: Samyagvak - Right speech has both positive and negative dimension. Negatively it means control of speech that is refraining from lying frivolous talk etc. Positively it means guiding speech towards right resolves leading to right kind of action.
4. Right Conduct: Samyagkarmanta - Right Conduct include Pancasila or five vows, which is abstention from wrong action. Pancasila consists of abstention from a killing, stealing, sensuality, living, intoxication.
5. Right action: Karmanta -Right action aims at promoting moral, honourable, and peaceful conduct.
6. Right Livelihood: Samyagjiva - Right livelihood refers to maintaining life by honest means. which will automatically lead to personal as well as social purification.
7. Right effort: Samyagvyayama - Right efforts or constant effort to maintain moral progress by banishing evil thoughts and entertaining goodness.
8. Right mindfulness: Samyak Samadhi - who one has successfully stepped up to this last step of the ladder is prescribed to attain.

### C. *The Realms of Rebirth*

In Buddhism, one's present life is seen as one of a innumerable number of lives straighten back into the past, with no perceptible beginning to the series. Such lives take various forms. They may be relatively pleasant, as in the case of rebirth as a human or in one of the many heaven worlds. They may be relatively pleasant, as in the case of rebirth as a human or in one of the many heaven worlds. They may be disagreeable, though as in the case of rebirth as some kind of animal, as a 'departed one' in the form of a frustrated ghostly being, or in one of a number of hells, where life is like an extended nightmare of intense suffering with feelings that are 'exclusively painful, sharp severe'.

The Buddhist perspective on the cycle of rebirths is that it is not a pleasant affair, but that all unenlightened people are reborn whether they like it or not, and whether they believe in rebirth or not. The process of life and rebirth is not seen to have any inherent purpose; for it was not conceived and created by any being. It is known as samsara, or wandering on from life to life.

The only sensible aim, for one who understands samsara to some extent, is to strive, firstly avoid its more unpleasant realms, and ultimately to transcend it altogether, by attaining Nirvana. And to help others to do so. Most Buddhists therefore aim to attain a heavenly or a human rebirth, with Nirvana as the long-term goal. Buddhist heavens, then, are this side of salvation, for Nirvana beyond the limitations of both earthly and heavenly existence.

#### *D. Karma and its Effects*

The doctrine of Karma must presuppose some view of the moral determinants of action. Those who naturalize karma as a psychological mechanism of character development tend to argue that character, as a relevantly extended sense of cetana, is the morally determining factor for good or bad actions. While good consequences correspond to good actions in the doctrine of karma, these effects presuppose rather than determine the evaluative worth of the action. From this it has been argued that 'karma, is not a consequentialist ethic but a virtue ethic' [5] Karma literally means 'action, and the principle of Law of Karma. Karma literally means 'action', and the principle of the 'law of Karma' is that beings are reborn according to the nature and quality of their actions. Past actions are said to be 'Welcome' one in future life like a person being welcomed by kinsmen, so that Deeds are one's own... beings are heir to deeds, deeds are matrix, deeds are kin, deeds are arbiters. A person's actions mould their consciousness, making them into a certain kind of person, so that when they die their outer form tends to correspond to the type of nature that has been developed. Prior to the time of Buddha, the basic idea of karma and rebirth had been expressed in the Brahmanical compositions known as Upanishads. There was as much emphasis on karmas/actions being ritually right as on their being ethically right. In Buddhism, though, the prominence is strongly on the ethical aspect of action as the applicable factor in causing karmic results. Actions can also lead to karmic fruits in a human life. This might be the present life, or a future human life, be this one's next life, or one that comes after one or more other types of rebirths. In textual descriptions of such fruits, one sees that they reflect back on a person something which is particularly appropriate to the nature of the relevant action. Some insist that Buddhist ethics is best construed in consequentialist terms [6].

#### *E. Rebirth, Karma and Motivation*

Belief in rebirth and karma clearly has an impact on the way people view their actions: good and bad actions matter, they are of consequence, not things with no impact on life. Good actions are encouraged because, through their goodness, they lead to pleasant, uplifting effects for the doer. Bad actions are discouraged as their badness leads to unpleasant karmic results. The idea of the cycle of rebirth also provides a perspective on life which is supportive of sympathy and respect for other beings. Within the round of rebirths, all beings are part of the same cycle of lives. Each human being has been an animal, ghost, hell-being and God in the past, and is likely to be so again at some time in the future. Any form of suffering one witnesses

in another human or other being has been experienced by oneself at some time; one should not cling to rebirths and should have compassion for other sentient beings. Working with a rebirth perspective also helps sustain a long-term.

Motivation for moral and spiritual practice. While death means that one loses all physical possessions, and is parted from one's loved ones and one's life's 'attainments', the purification of character that is developed by ethical and meditative practice is seen as something that death does not destroy. It becomes part of one's mental continuum that will 'spill over' into another life. The naturalized accounts of karma emphasize the way enacting intentional attitudes, expressing them in bodily action, serves to establish and reinforce them as habituated positioning or aspects of character. It is not clear that this captures all relevant aspects of the traditional doctrine of karma. One difficulty concerns how it accommodates the retributive aspect of the traditional doctrine and the sense of agents being held morally responsible by a mechanism of justice that metes out appropriate rewards and punishments [7]. Many of the historical examples of Karmic fruit refer to such goods as fortune, longevity, health, physical appearance, and social influence. Without the doctrine of rebirth to guarantee the proportionality of merit and reward or punishment, these retributive goods have no place in a naturalized conception of karma.

#### *F. Key Buddhist values*

From the perspective of the Four Noble Truths, ethics is not for its own sake, but is an essential ingredient on the path to the final goal. Many modern Buddhists tend to abandon the traditional principle to solve the problems, replacing them with abstract western principles to solve the problems, replacing them with abstract western principles that are more harmful to society and the world. Whereas, early Buddhism can help effectively to address the critical challenges of modern life. The four noble truths and noble eight-fold path as well as the five precepts of Buddhism have all the answers to keep checking out the difficulties of the present time. Others maintain that Buddhist moral thought is such a complex and messy affair that it resists systematization into a singular ethical theory [8]. Now a days, there is a condition of the social existence of a powerful set of cultural, political, economic and spatial relationships that is significantly different from all the past forms of human experience which can be termed as modernity. In this modern era, Buddhist experts from several Asian and western nations address a number of ethical problems from the Buddhist perspective, including medical and environmental ethics.

Buddhist ethics can be looked at in several different ways. There is the situation of the man in the street who is concerned with life in the world of the senses. On a superior level arises the aim of experiencing the joy and peace of a higher consciousness. Higher still is the desire to achieve the ultimate goal with a direct realization of the supramundane. The primary ethical activity which a Buddhist learns to develop is giving or generosity, dana, which forms a basis for further moral and spiritual development. Buddhist moral thought in terms of Western philosophical categories is moribund because it

structurally overlooks what is distinctive of Buddhist moral thought [9].

They search for the meaning in life, and seek to attain rationally justifiable moral ideals and goals. Buddhist morality has much to offer to modern man. The ethical teaching of Buddhism advocates an ideal of moral perfection as it is ultimate goal. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist way of life is the removal of greed, hatred, and delusion. If much of the psychological instability that produces moral crisis in modern society is the consequence of the generations of greed, hatred and delusion, the Buddhist ideal of moral perfection can be said to be directly relevant to the social life of modern man. Modern developments offer insecurity and sustainability as well as tensions and dissatisfaction associated with them. When one thinks of modern life one can think in terms of a great degree of optimism and an equal degree of pessimism. Buddhism has an application today and basic place in modern life because of its timeless relevance, emanating from a set of eternal values.

## 2. Conclusion

The theoretical discussion of ethical problems is the very foundation of their application in practical life. Such a discussion is not only necessary from the academic but also the modern age is an age of transition and of interrupt contrasts. Man, today has reached heights of civilization and culture that he never reached before in the history of human civilization. Science has benefited man in developing his material resources, but at the same time it has deprived him of his spiritual and ethical development. The invention of machines, and industrialization and complex technology have given rise to a commercial civilization which puts a premium on wealth over finer human values and sentiments. A man in the village who untouched by this civilization even today values love and affection more than wealth, but the urban population particularly in the advanced countries of the world, suffers from economic prejudice even when it has to deal with human problems.

The aim of our study is too according to Ethical Buddhism to lead a successful life in this world with ethical and intellectual means. Buddhist Philosophy is basically very practical in its approach. Buddha himself had attained Nirvana or liberation. However, he wanted the entire humanity to be free from suffering and pain and attain Nirvana. He has given the cause as well as remedy in form of eight-fold path for human suffering. Therefore, his analysis of human condition is practical and complete. However, this practical approach and subtle 'theoretical analysis' has itself yield very rich philosophy, which has always attracted people in all the ages and in all the corners of the world. If we take Buddhism in its widest possible sense, spanning countries, cultures, historical periods, and distinct philosophical traditions, we find much agreement in moral views but also different points of moral emphasis, distinct modes of moral reasoning, and disagreement about what the Buddha's teachings practically entail. Recall the four Noble Truths. The fourth truth outlines an eightfold path or way of living. One of its constituents is 'right action'. In response to queries about what this practically entails, the Buddha provided asset of precepts of his disciples to follow in a monastic setting.

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