

## DEFINITION OF GOOD IN BUDDHISM

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*It has often been said that Buddhism is unique in the world as an ethico-religious system. Dr. W.S. Karunaratne discusses one more area in which this uniqueness is manifested. Buddhist morality stems from man's realization of the selfless nature of existence. 'Good' is not seen as arbitrary and absolute but is viewed as a subjective standard depending on an individual's personal decision regarding what is beneficial to oneself as well as others. In making this decision as a Buddhist he depends on contemporary social mores, the Buddha's teaching and his own perceptions on what constitutes 'good'. The Buddha's ethical system is again unique in that 'sin' is not seen as that which transgresses divine injunctions but as that action which is committed through ignorance. It retards one's spiritual progress and chains one to the samsaric cycle but not 'eternally' punishable.*

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'Good' and 'Bad' are so obvious that they deny objective definition. Yet it has claimed the attention of most thinkers and religious and ethical teachers in all climes and countries. Their manifold attempts at defining 'good' from the earliest times down the centuries form an interesting study. Here it is intended to inquire into what Buddhism has to say on the subject. Gautama, the Buddha (B.C. 563 - B.C.486) was one of the earliest thinkers to attempt a definition of 'good'. There is plenty of material in Buddhist Literature bearing on the theory of 'good' in Buddhism, which well merits treatment in a separate monograph. The following study is based on but a few of the most important passages occurring in the Pali Canon only, together with their commentaries.

All definitions of 'good' fall under the two broad categories known to students of ethics as 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist'. The Buddha's definition comes under the former. The earlier Greek thinkers, however, with their penchant for scientific examination looked upon good like everything else, as a subject of objective inquiry. The Buddha, on the

other hand seemed to have held the view that an objective definition of 'good' did not make for edification. Hence he employed the 'subjectivist' method of defining it. And nowhere else, too, do we get a definition of the intrinsic quality of good as such. The Buddha's definition of 'good' was determined by practical considerations. He had in view the average individual to whom a theoretical and metaphysical interpretation of 'good' would have had little appeal. As a religious and ethical teacher the Buddha had to give a practical definition of what was 'good' and what was 'bad'.

Perhaps the most authoritative canonical passage bearing on the Buddha's definition of 'good' occurs in the Ambalatthika Rahulovada Sutta, where the Buddha tells Rahula what in his opinion constituted 'good'. The passage reads-

'What think you Rahula? What is a mirror for?'

'To reflect Sir.'

'In just the same way, you must reflect again and again doing every act, in speaking every word and in thinking every thought. When you want to do anything you must reflect whether it would conduce to your own harm or to other's harm or both and if so, it is a wrong act, productive of woe and ripening unto woe. If reflection tells you that this is the nature of that contemplated fact, assuredly you should not do it. But if reflection assures you there is no harm but good in it then you may do it.'

A careful study of the passage leads us to many conclusions. It shows a psychological conception of Buddhist ethics. It emphasises the importance of reflection in the matter of deciding 'good' and 'bad'. Here we find that the good has been decided in relation to its effects. The Buddha was influenced in this manner by philanthropic and altruistic considerations. A good thing has to be wholesome both to oneself and to others. That constituted the chief characteristic of a good thing. Here we also note that 'good' is juxtaposed with harm. 'Good-ness' is 'identical with harm-less-ness' and 'good-less-ness' with 'harm-ful-ness'. In other words the foremost quality of 'good' is to be taken as 'ahimsa'.

The above passage has to be taken complementarily with another occurring in the Anguttara Nikaya, in order to understand fully the Buddha's conception of 'good'. This latter passage is equally important as the other in that it serves to show how the Buddha differs from other thinkers in the definition of 'good'. The Buddha tells the Kalama princes how they should decide a good thing:-

'This I have said to you, O Kalamas but you may accept it, not because it is a report, not because it is a tradition, not because it is so said in the past, not because it is given in the Scripture, not for the sake of discussion, not for the sake of particular method, not for the sake of careful consideration, not for the sake of forbearing with wrong views, not because it appears suitable, not because your preceptor is a recluse but if you yourselves understand that this is meritorious and blameless and when accepted is for your benefit and happiness, then you may accept it.'

The passage is remarkable since it shows a breadth of outlook unparalleled in any other system of religion or ethics. From this we learn that the Buddha did not dogmatize on 'good' or 'bad'. No arbitrary standard or criterion is set to evaluate them. Here is a subjective view of 'good' since each has to think for himself in his conscience about ethical questions. The Buddha did not hold that that which was in accordance with his teachings, necessarily was good. He has even maintained that none should be taken as an authority in deciding what is 'good', not excepting himself. This contrasts with the Christian conception of ethics which is theo-centric. In Christianity that which is in keeping with the will of God alone is good, any transgression thereof constituting sin or evil. A conscience also, however, has been postulated in Christian ethics in so far as man distinguishes between one action as good and another as bad. Yet ultimately it is conditioned by the judgement of a foreign agency, in this case God in Heaven. And the highest good (*summum bonum*) in Christianity too is determined by Divine Will. Buddhist ethics also sharply contrast with many other religions in so far as, in ethical considerations, they do not admit free will which alone is the criterion recognised in Buddhism. In conception, no other ethics could be more opposed to those of the Buddha who preached the doctrine of man's liberty of thought. In the evaluation of 'good' Buddha says, no reference or respect should be made to institutions and traditions. Herein Buddhist ethics differ from Confucian and Brahmanic ethics. According to Confucius the highest morality consists in perpetuating traditions and carrying out the bidding of ancient sages of the hoary past. That which has been declared to be good in the classical writings alone was good. While the Buddha emphasised the importance of the individual conscience, Confucius was in favour of subordinating it to the better judgement of the past generations. Brahmin ethics also advocate adherence to social institutions. While Brahmanic books enjoin the acceptance of the inspired seers and adherence to codes as constituting good, the Buddha declares that in deciding good even the Buddhist

Scriptures, let alone S'ruti Literature, should not be taken as an authority. The autonomous and personal principle of Buddhist morality contrasts with the legal and social principle of Brahmanism.

The eminently psychological character of Buddhist ethics is brought out clearly in another passage, in the Canon where the Buddha enumerates three criteria (*adhipateyyani*) for deciding 'good' and 'bad'. The first relates to introspective psychology where one decides 'good' by reflection and weighing things and judging them for oneself. The second criterion is used by one who takes as being 'good' what the public opinion deems as 'good'. In the last criterion one takes as 'good' that which has been taught as 'good', by the Buddha. Evidently the first is to be preferred for that would be in keeping with the Buddha's declaration that nothing is to be taken as being good merely out of regard for his personality.

In the two passages quoted above we see that 'good' is interpreted in Buddhism in terms of happiness producing (felicific) results. Hence it has been held, that conceptually Buddhist ethics are hedonistic. This however, is a term that could be applied to all ethics, for 'Man' himself is a hedonistic being as all beings are and no mortal craves for an infelicitous effect so far as mundane matters are concerned.

Additional light is thrown on the conception of good in Buddhism by the words used to denote 'good' and 'bad'. These words are important for two reasons. In the first place their etymologies supply the best clue to an understanding of the meaning given to them. Secondly they are important from the point of view of the history of Buddhist ethics since the later commentaries tried to give various new meanings to them.

The two words so commonly used by the Buddha to denote 'good' and 'bad' are kusala and akusala. Kusala means 'clever, skilful, expert, good, meritorious'. Applied in a moral sense the two words are always identical with punna and papa respectively. In the canonical passages where ethics are discussed the word is used as an adjective qualifying vacikamma (verbal conduct), manokamma (mental conduct) and kaya kamma (bodily conduct). The meanings of the word kusala show it to be positive and efficient in sense. This is significant from the point of view of Buddhist ethics. Though kusala and akusala have acquired a technical sense as meaning 'good' and 'bad', there are a few other words too that have been used by the Buddha in the 'good' sense. In these we see other aspects of good. For instance, the Buddha used the word Ariya to describe the 'good path' that He had selected discarding the two extremes of self-indulgence (*kamasukhallikanuyoga*) and self-mortification (*attakilamathanuyoga*).

The word means 'noble' in the context in which it is used throughout the Pali Canon. In the earlier Vedic Literature the word was used in the racial sense. The fair Aryan conquerors who spoke the Aryan language were proud of their race and used the word in contradistinction to the Dasyus, their foes, the less civilised non-Aryan and aboriginal inhabitants of India. It might then seem as if the Buddha meant all that pertained to the Aryan race was to be taken as good and noble. Such an implication, however, does not appear to have been intended. The Buddha, it might be mentioned, had a penchant for pouring new wine into old bottles, of ascribing 'Buddhist' meanings to terms already in current usage during his time. The use of this word in the new ethical sense, therefore, served not only to satisfy the racial vanity of the Aryans but also to make the latter conscious of the virtuous life which they should live up to. That the Buddha had such a twofold purpose in mind is clearly seen in his use of the word Anariya to denote all that is ignoble, not conforming to goodness.

Elsewhere 'good' is equated with right-fulness (truth). This is clear from the eight steps of the Aryan Path, where the qualifying adjective is samma (right). A good view is one not necessarily entertained by the Buddha or so decreed by God or agreed as such at an assembly. A right view is a true view, one based on truth. In other words to see rightly or 'goodly' is to see things as they truly are. A 'good' thought is one free from lobha (craving), dosa (enmity) and moha (ignorance). A good word is a true word which is not harsh and which does not involve a tale-bearing. A good action is one free from immorality and wholesome to all concerned. This is the manner in which 'good' is defined in the eight-fold path. Here we see the close connection between enlightenment and morality in Buddhist ethics.

The conception of good shows an interesting development in the later commentarial exegesis. Buddhaghosa has offered four meanings in his commentary on the Dhammasangani. There 'good' is alternately taken as meaning: (a) wholesome; (b) virtuous; (c) skilful; and (d) felicific and then comprehensively as including all the four meanings. Fanciful etymologies have been suggested for kusala in justification of new interpretations. In this commentary cited above Buddhaghosa gives the following etymologies:-

1. Kusala is shaking off (*salana*) of evil (*kucchita*).
2. Kusa is that which lies (*sayana*) in the evil state (*Kucchita*). The cutting off (*salana*) of the same is kusala.
3. Wisdom (*nana*) is kusa because it lessens (*tanakaronto*), evil

(*kucchita*). That which is to be obtained (*latabba*) by kusa is kusala.

4. A spear (*kusa*) injures on both its sides, legs and limbs. Kusala is so called because it cuts (*lunanti*) whatever kilesas there arise.

Ingenious as these etymologies are they yet represent attempts to twist and strain the simple meaning given to kusala by the Buddha. The Buddha was against all hair splitting argumentations of whatever kind they were. That the Buddha merely infused an ethical sense to the word is therefore much more probable than that he supplied these far-fetched etymologies.

By way of conclusion it would also be appropriate to mention herein the relation of Nibbana to the theory of 'good' in Buddhism. The Buddhist definition of 'good', being expressedly subjectivist and relativist applied to things that lay within the realm of relative and conditioned existence.

Nibbana on the other hand is an absolute (*ekanta*) and indeterminate (*abyakata*) state. In terms of the relative world, Nibbana has been described as the highest bliss. But it is beyond both happiness and sorrow. Like the acts of the arahant, Nibbana is beyond the limitations of 'good' and 'bad'.