

## **SOME NOTES ON BUDDHIST ETHICS**

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The term Dharma is used by Buddhists in several senses-religious, metaphysical, ethical and legal. Its ethical import will be dealt with here. Buddha's ethical teachings may be analysed in terms of five questions. What is the good? Why do the good? What are the grounds of the good? How is the good achieved? How is evil to be dealt with?

As to the first, one answer is that Buddha associated the good with a set of attitudes – love (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathy and joy (mudita), with impartiality (upekkha) and forgiveness (khanti). The goal is to make them so much a part of one's self that one acts unconsciously in terms of them when making moral choices. Another answer is that Buddha said "Not nakedness, not platted hair, nor dirt, nor fasting...nor sitting motionless can purify a mortal who has not overcome desires; "Pleasures destroy the foolish... the foolish by his thirst for pleasures destroys himself..."; "Those who are slaves to passions run down the stream of desires, as a spider runs down the web he has made himself." One is reminded of the biblical injunction that "The love of money is the root of all evil...", the answer being in both cases that desires or wealth are not bad in themselves.

In the second alternative Buddha is enjoying the principle of selectivity. Certain pleasure can be legitimately enjoyed up to a certain degree. Being joyful at the good fortune of another is surely admissible; delighting in another's misfortune is not. Eating to meet bodily needs is permissible; indulging to the state of gluttony is not. As Buddha said "To satisfy the necessities of life is not evil. To keep the body in good health is a duty, for otherwise we shall not be able to trim the lamp of wisdom, and keep our mind strong and clear.

The English philosopher, John Stuart Mill, also advocated a qualified hedonism. He distinguished between physical and mental pleasures, advocating the latter for their great permanency. Buddha used the same criterion—"There is no satisfying lusts, even by a shower of gold pieces; he who knows that lusts have a short taste and cause pain, he is wise." The Roman Stoic Epictetus advised selectivity also—"It is a mark of a mean capacity to spend much time on the things common to the body, such as much exercise, much eating, much drinking, much easing of the body, much copulation. These things should be done as subordinate things; let all your care be directed to the mind."

Buddha associated the good with avoiding the extremes of self-indulgent and mortification. From his own experience he said “What is that middle path O bhikkhus, avoiding these two extremes, discovered by the Tathagata—that path which opens the eyes, and bestows understanding, which leads to peace of mind, to the higher wisdom, to full enlightenment, to Nirvana?... Let me teach you, O bhikkhus, the middle path...By offering the emaciated devotee produces sickly thoughts in his mind. Mortification is not conducive even to worldly knowledge; how much less to a triumph over the senses.”

While Nirvana is the end of moderation, freedom is the result noted in another statement—“He who lives for pleasures only, his senses uncontrolled, immoderate in his food, idle and weak, him Mara will certainly overthrow, as the wind throws down a weak tree. He who lives without looking for pleasures, his sense well-controlled, moderate in his food, faithful and strong, him Mara will certainly not overthrow...” Moderation and control makes one free through avoiding the tyranny of extremes.

Aristotle’s comparable statement on moderation is interesting: “By goodness I mean goodness of moral character, since it is moral goodness that deals with feelings and actions, and it is in them that we find excess, deficiency and a mean. It is possible, for example, to experience fear, boldness, desire, anger, pity and pleasures and pains generally, too much or too little or to the right amount. If we feel them too much or too little, we are wrong. But to have these feelings at the right times on the right occasions towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to have them in the right measure, that is somewhere between the extremes; and this is what characterises goodness.”

Among other items regarding the nature of the good is Buddha’s linking of virtue with self-denial and evil with self-assertion -- “...there is no wrong in this world, no vice, no evil, except what flows from the assertion of self” and ... “there is no evil but what flows from self. There is no wrong but what is done by the assertion of self.” Buddha correlated self-denial with sharing and self-giving, while self-assertion stems from selfishness and gives rise to anxiety and an exploitative attitude toward reality. Self-denial enables a person to center his life around that which is other and greater than himself. In the Mahayana tradition the Bodhisattva personifies the ideal of self-renunciation, for he refrains from entering Nirvana in order to aid others to reach it.

Buddha also associated the good with the universal. He replied to two young Brahmans—“The Tathagata lets his mind pervade the four quarters of the world with thoughts of love. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around and everywhere will continue to be filled with love, far-reaching, grown great, and beyond measure.” A Buddhist wrote in the Discourse on Loving-kindness—“Even as a mother would cherish her only child with her life, even

thus toward all beings let him cultivate a boundless heart. Let him cultivate above, below and all around love towards all the world, unhindered, without anger, without enmity.” A contemporary Buddhist also associates the good with the universal in his characterisation of metta and karuna – “They banish selfishness and disharmony and promote altruism, unity and brotherhood. They are thoughts to be cultivated towards all beings irrespective of race, caste, colour, community, creed, East or West, and therefore they are known as boundless states, for they are not limited, are not confined to watertight compartments. They unfold all beings without any partiality or grading according to rank, quality, position, power, learning, value and so on which keep men apart.”

In regard to love, for example, the Buddhist teaching is, then, that real love must be all inclusive. That person does not truly love whose love is limited to his own group, nation or race. Such love the Buddhist would call pema in contrast to metta. It is partial and selfish rather than universal and unselfish.

Buddha’s statements “Neither for one’s own nor for others’ sake should one do any evil. One should not covet a son, wealth, or a kingdom, nor wish to succeed by unjust means. Such a man is indeed virtuous, wise and righteous”, show his concern for the problem of means and ends. It is a continuing one as the eighth century poet Santideva wrote “It is not desirable for me to obtain something, if the necessary action involves a moral obstacle to acquiring it; my acquiring will vanish here, but my evil will remain steadfast.”

Using evil means and seeking evil ends is contrary to common morality. Many, however, are tempted to believe that evil means can be justified by good ends. This Buddha discovered. Only good means may be used to reach good ends. The reasons? A major one no doubt is that means and ends are inextricable and mutually influence each other.

In response to the question “Why do the good” the Buddhist does not deny the Hindu’s motive enjoyed in the Gita of doing the good for its own sake. In a Buddhist sutra of the New Wisdom School we read “Friendliness means to have hopes for the welfare of others, to long for it, to care for it, to delight in it. It is affection unsullied by the motives of sense-desire, passion or hope of a return.” The Buddhist would reinforce such idealism with pragmatism. Buddha said that one should see “evil as evil and be disgusted with it.” When we see evil for what it really is, we loath it because we realise the untold human suffering evil brings about. Evil is rejected because of its results, just as the good is accepted for the same reason.

Buddha did not accept punishment and rewards as sufficient motives either, for he believed the stimulus for virtue must come from within. Rewards are impermanent. The recipient is happy when rewarded and miserable when not.

Thus his state of being is dependent on what is external to him and he is not free. Once a person realises this, he will give up a rewards motivation.

Doing good “spontaneously” would surely be acceptable to Buddha, spontaneously not meaning thoughtlessly but rather because, as mentioned earlier, of the right attitudes being deeply ingrained in one. We are reminded of Epictetus’ statement – “As the sun does not wait for prayers and incantations to be induced to rise, but immediately shines and is saluted by all, so do you also not wait for the clapping of hands, and shouts and praise to be induced to do good, but be a doer of good voluntarily, and you will be loved as much as the sun.” A spontaneous ethics takes into account effects but not rewards. It enables one to transcend ethical dualism, the giving up of the thought of “both victory and defeat”, the going beyond both good and evil.

Buddha was concerned especially about rooting out all selfish motives. Even a good deed done from a selfish intent cannot be deemed truly good. The Bodhisattva, as an example, is to perform the ten Dharmas “...with a heart disinterested and free from any thought of gain” and “may, as a result of this meritorious action, all beings be born unstained by the impurities of the womb.” Such complete self-giving is possible only when selfish motives are absent entirely. One answer to “What is the grounds of the good?” is found in Buddha’s statement to Anthapindika – “Let us abandon the heresy of worshipping Isvara, let us no longer lose ourselves in vain speculations..; let us surrender self and all selfishness, and as all things are fixed by causation, let us practise good so that good may result from our actions.”

By causation Buddha meant the principle of Karma. Every deed has an effect; moreover the effect is like the deed. Good deeds have good effects, evil deeds evil effects. Acknowledging Karma undercuts any rewards motive. One does the good realising it is inevitable that good accrue both for oneself and others but not because such good results. Karma and rewards are easily confused. For example, Christ’s statements, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” and “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy”, a rewards-oriented person might interpret. “My reward for being merciful will be to gain mercy for myself and so I shall be merciful, etc.” However, from a Karma interpretation, all Jesus is pointing out is the irrefractable truth that mercy gives rise to mercy.

As to the fourth question of how the good is achieved, the Hinayana tradition especially emphasises “achieved”. The good is the result of long, unceasing effort and not the gift of a gracious Deity. “He who does not rouse himself when it is time to rise; who, though young and strong, is full of sloth...that lazy and idle man will never find the way to Enlightenment” the Dhammapada states.

Moreover Buddha emphasised starting with oneself- “The fault of others is easily noticed but that of oneself is difficult to perceive. A man winnows his neighbour’s faults like chaff, but his own he hides, as a cheat hides the false die from the gambler. We are reminded of the Hindu Purnas’ statement “The vile are ever prone to detect the faults of others, though they be as small as mustard seeds, and persistently shut their eyes against their own, though they be as large as Vilva fruits.”

According to Buddha self-control is the means of achieving the good – “Let a wise man blow off the impurities of his self, as a smith blows off the impurities of silver, one by one, little by little, and from time to time”; “Restraint in the eye is good, good is restraint in the ear... good is restraint in the tongue...”; “If some conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquer himself, he is the greatest of conquerors.” Self-control is no easy task – “Bad deeds, and deeds hurtful to ourselves, are easy to do; what is beneficial and good, that is very difficult.” The results are far-reaching however – “He who overcomes the fierce thirst, difficult to be conquered in this world, sufferings fall off from him, like water drops from a lotus leaf.”

Buddha believed that “Self is the lord of self, who else could be the Lord?” Each is both his own master and responsible for himself – “By oneself evil is done; by oneself one suffers; by oneself evil is left undone; by oneself one is purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself; no one can purify another.” Through his deeds one builds up good or bad Karma. Original Buddhism was modified as it came into contact with non-Indian cultures. Pure Land Buddhism in China was less individualistic, emphasizing the infinite love and compassion of Amitabha Buddha who saves those who call on him in faith. Work and self-effort is supplemented by Amitabha’s grace, whether for achieving the good or Nirvana.

As to how to deal with evil, Buddhism and Hinduism reinforce each other. Buddha and his followers emphasised the returning of good for evil. It is the theme of the popular story by Buddha of Prince Dirghayu. The Dhammapada states “He who carries out his purpose by violence is not therein righteous”, and, “Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good”. In his sermon at Rajagaha Buddha said “Yea, cherish good-will right and left, all round, early and late, and without hindrance, without stint...the rule of life that’s always best is to be loving kind.”

Loving-kindness is to be expressed in thought, word and deed. Buddha’s insistence that one love enemy as well as friend as the real test of Metta and Karuna is reflected in the ninth of his ten precepts – “Cleanse your heart of malice and cherish no hatred, not even against your enemies;... embrace all living beings with kindness.” Santideva wrote similarly – “It is undesirable

that there be sorrow, humiliation, reproach or disgrace for one's loved ones or oneself or, even contra wise for one's enemy."

The universal love Buddha urged has patience, forbearance, endurance and forgiveness as a prerequisite. One should have the patience of the elephant, the Awakened One, and the Brahmin, and one should forgive as the Bodhisattva does. Buddhists offer several vindications for love of enemy as well as friend. Buddha himself exemplified such. Secondly, it is practical for, as Buddha said "Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by not hatred...", and, "Conquer your foe by force, you increase his enmity. Conquer by love, and you will reap no after-sorrow." Force begets force and love begets love. Thus the law of Karma justifies universal love.

Furthermore, returning evil for evil only increases rather than diminishes the total amount of evil in the world – "Do ye think that ye can destroy wrong by retaliating evil for evil and thus increasing wrong?" Buddha also declared a person should not let his actions be determined by others. If he does, he is no longer free and master of himself – "Let us live happily then, not hating those who hate us... Among men who are greedy let us dwell free from greed." Love frees while hatred blinds. A contemporary Buddhist writes "Hate restricts; love releases. Hatred strangles; love enfranchises... Hatred agitates; love quiets, stills, calms. Hatred divides; love unites." Love of enemy is a means of self-purification and freedom. Asvaghosa, the Buddhist poet, wrote in the first century A.D. "If ill-will or the desire to hurt others should stir in your mind, purify it again with its opposite, which will act on it like a wishing jewel in muddied water. Friendliness and compassion are their antidotes."

The concept of suffering love, found in Mahayana Buddhism especially, is a further justification for loving universally. The Bodhisattva as the proto-type of such love takes upon himself the wrongs of mankind. Out of love for man he pays the penalty for such wrongs, so that he to whom the wrong is done need not require the wrong-doing. Thus we read in the sutras "A Bodhisattva resolves: I will take upon myself the burden of all suffering...I have made the vow to save all beings...The whole world of living beings I must rescue from the terrors of birth, old age, sickness, death and rebirth, of all kinds of moral offence...I must give myself away as a pawn through which the whole world is redeemed." The similarity to the Suffering-Servant and the Messiah in the Judaic and Christian traditions in the West is obvious.

In ethics a necessary distinction is between the real and the ideal. This analysis has dealt mainly with the ideal Buddha set forth. Buddhists have found it difficult to live up to, just as Christians have the Christian or Confucianists the Confucian ideal. The failure to do so in each instance does not invalidate the ideal, however.

Buddha was both an ethical realist and optimist. He admitted the world is full of hatred and injustice. He believed also that it need not be so necessarily. Buddha's was a humanist's ethics of self-realization as was Aristotle's who wrote "We ought not to listen to those who counsel us 'O man, think as man should and O mortal, remember your mortality'. Rather ought we, so far as in us lies, to put on immortality and to leave nothing unattempted in the effort to live in conformity with the highest thing within us."

Buddha believed that to act compassionately is to act most highly. He believed man's natural response to suffering is compassion; an unnatural selfishness leads him often to react otherwise. Rousseau's concept of the "Noble Savage" is a western parallel. Man in his natural state is good but civilisation corrupts him by stirring up egoistic and selfish tendencies. The Twentieth century emphasis on "objectivity" brings the same result. Compassion as the highest virtue leads to inner and thus true freedom. Though unrestrained externally, a person is not free if he is a slave of his passions. Buddha associated the good with the universal and unconditional. To practise love to all was Buddha's "categorical imperative", to use a Kantian term. Hate is like all limited and conditional things which the author of the *Multitude of Graceful Actions* describes as "...empty and powerless...conditioned by ignorance, and on final analysis does not exist..."

Buddha's is an "attitudinal" ethics in that he emphasises right attitudes. Thus it is also an inner-oriented ethics in that virtue must come from within and not be prompted from without. He is a non-legalistic ethics also, for Buddha did not emphasise extensive moral rules, laws or regulations. If right attitudes are truly a part of one, they will tell a person what to do. An attitudinal ethics enable Buddha to escape ethical relativism. For he would claim that such positive attitudes as love, compassion and forgiveness are universally applicable. They will work everywhere whether practised by an Indian, German, American, Russian or Chinese.

Finally, ethics was important to Buddha because he believed a person's worth depends on his character, not wealth, intelligence or place in society. So we find Buddha saying, "A man does not become a Brahmana by his platted hair, by his family, or by birth; in whom there is truth and righteousness, he is blessed, he is a Brahmana." Similarly, a contemporary Buddhist asserts "Rank, caste, colour and even wealth and power cannot necessarily make a man a person of value to the world. Only his character makes a man great and worthy of honour."

