

THE MORAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NIBBANA

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Buddhist moral philosophy put in a nutshell. The reader will have to concentrate hard before he can grasp the moral significance of Nibbana.

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Ed.

In one of his discourses addressing his disciples, the Buddha says, "Brethren! two things do I teach – suffering and the cessation of suffering". The cause of suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering, represent what are known as the Four Noble Truths, the fundamental doctrine of the Buddha.

The moral philosophy of Buddhism has to be understood in relation to the four noble truths. In fact the moral philosophy forms part of the fourth truth, namely the eight-fold path. This path is so called because it is constituted of eight factors.

This path has also been explained in terms of what is known as the three-fold training (*tisikkha*), i.e. moral training, mental training and spiritual training represented by *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna* respectively. They may be said to represent the three stages in the path of righteousness leading to the realization of Nibbana.

In a restricted sense, *sila* or the first stage of the path is the scope of moral philosophy. But in a wider sense, moral philosophy may be said to cover all the three stages of the path. This has to be understood with reference to the nature of the final deliverance attained as a result of treading the noble path. In some of his discourses the Buddha refers to this deliverance as the total liberation of mind. This liberation is effected from mental fetters. In other words, these mental fetters are so many unwholesome thoughts. And the process of liberation begins with *sila*, proceeds through *Samadhi* and ends with *panna*.

In a restricted sense *sila* or moral conduct is confined to physical actions – verbal actions and bodily actions. But then we have to remember that only the voluntary actions have ethical value, and the non-voluntary actions have no ethical value. Really speaking, it is the volition (*cetana*) that lends moral significance to actions. For this reason in an extended sense, this aspect of mental action is also included in *sila*.

In Buddhism moral precepts are not commandments imposed from above. They are self-imposed. They are voluntary practices undertaken for the benefits inherent in them. The sanction behind them is the causal law or rather the moral law (*kammaniyama*) which says evil deeds produce bitter results and good deeds produce sweet results. Therefore the Buddha says 'having seen the evil consequences (*adinava*) give up what is unwholesome or immoral (*akusala*) and having seen good consequences (*anisamsa*) cultivate what is wholesome or moral (*kusala*). That is to say, when one sees how the immoral actions produce unhappiness for self and others then they can be given up, and when one sees how the wholesome actions produce happiness for self and others then they can be cultivated.

Here it has to be noted that thoughts are the springs of action. Thus unwholesome thoughts give rise to unwholesome actions. They have all been explained in detail in terms of so many types of thought (*citta*) and psychic factors (*cetasika*) in Abhidhamma. Among them there are three immoral or unwholesome factors and three moral or wholesome factors which are basic in nature. The unwholesome factors are greed or craving (*lobha*), hate (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*); the wholesome factors are generosity (*alobha*), good-will (*adosa*) and understanding (*amoha*). Therefore in the ultimate analysis the moral and immoral nature of actions has to be determined with reference to these psychic factors.

The average man of the world goes by a moral code affecting his personal life and social life, without being aware of the deeper implications of the springs of action. His considerations are more or less external.

Those who are dedicated to a higher life take into consideration deeper implications of the springs of action. Without being satisfied with a moral life in a limited sense, they also take to mental cultivation. In other words, they enter the field of *samadhi* represented by the second stage of the path of righteousness. *Samadhi* is attained as a result of overcoming unwholesome thoughts to tranquility of mind. In this connection it has to be pointed out that in this stage the wholesome thoughts become active and predominant and the unwholesome thoughts become passive and remain in a dormant state. Therefore tranquility attained in this kind of *samadhi* (including *jhanas*) is not lasting.

Lasting mental tranquility, peace and happiness can be attained only by eliminating all the unwholesome mental tendencies completely. This can be done only by understanding the true nature of things (*yathabuta-nana*). For this

one has to take to the practice of insight-meditation (*vipassana-bhavana*) represented by *panna*, the third and the last stage of the path of righteousness.

The practice of insight meditation leads one to the attainment of what is known as the supra-mundane plane (*lokuttara-bhumi*) represented by four paths (*magga*) and four fruits (*phala*). These spiritual paths and fruits are the result of destroying what are known as the ten mental fetters (*dasa samyojanani*). The destruction of these ten fetters represents the total liberation and for that matter purification of mind.

The perfect saint (*arahant*) who has attained this state of liberation has transcended the moral conflict of good and evil existing at a lower mental plane. Being free from egoism his actions flew spontaneously out of love and compassion. *Alobha*, *adosa* and *amoha* have become his very nature. Hence his actions have been characterized as *kiriya* or only functional in nature. This is the moral aspect of NIBBANA which may be represented as the supreme good in the present context for want of a better term. Thus the moral philosophy of Buddhism can be understood in a comprehensive sense to cover all the three stages of *sila*, *samadhi* and *panna*. This has been very beautifully expressed in one of the *gathas* in Dhammapada:

*Sabbapapassa akaranam, kusalassa upasampada,
Sacittapariyodapanam, etam Buddhanaśasanam.*

Not to do any evil, to do all that is good, to purify the mind – this is the teaching of the Buddhas or the Enlightened Ones.