

Ethics of Buddhism- A philosophical Analysis

G.Sowbhagya

Assistant Professor Department of Education Karnataka State Women's University
Bijapur-586101, India

Abstract

The sixth century B.C. may be regarded as an important landmark in the culture of the world. During this period men's mind in widely separated, parts of the world were stirred by problems of religion and salvation. Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Iran, Heraclitus and Permiades in Greece and Confucius and Lao Tse in china, all unknown to one another propagated new religions. All of them asked many pertinent and penetrating questions relating to the existing system. All of them led protestant movements against the existing system and in most cases succeeded.

Religion played an important role in the lives of Indians. During the sixth century B.C. preachers and wandering monks prepared the ground for the rise of some protestant religions in India, but this change in India during 6th century B.C. which was brought by Buddha was not restricted only to the sphere of religion and philosophy; changes were also marked in the realm of politics and economy as well. Indian history itself emerged out of legends and dubious traditions. Kings and kingdoms with known histories developed. The period witnessed new economic forces invigorated through the rapidly expanding commerce and increase in the number of artisans and their influence on society and the economy.

Buddha's teachings were primarily ethical. He wanted to make men perfect among the religious thinker of India. The Buddha was almost the first to realize the importance of practical ethics in personal as well as in social life. In fact, ethics for him is the main fundamental basis of the good life, even as the reason was the ultimate criterion of truth. His main ethical teachings basically centered on Four Noble truth and Eight fold path

KEYWORDS: Buddha, Ethics, Noble Truth, Eight Fold Paths, Triple Jewels

Introduction

Buddha was born in the 6th century BC in Lumbini, in what is now Nepal. His father, King Suddhodana, was leader of a large clan called the Shakya. His mother, Queen Maya, died shortly after his birth.

When Prince Siddhartha was a few days old, a holy man prophesied the Prince would be either a great military conqueror or a great spiritual teacher. King Suddhodana preferred the first outcome and prepared his son accordingly. He raised the boy in great luxury and shielded him from knowledge of religion and human suffering. The Prince reached the age of 29 with little experience of the world outside the walls of his opulent palaces.

The Four Passing Sights

One day, overcome with curiosity, Prince Siddhartha asked a charioteer to take him on a series of rides through the countryside. On these journeys he was shocked by the sight of an aged man, then a sick man, and then a corpse. The stark realities of old age, disease, and death seized and sickened the Prince.

Finally, he saw a wandering ascetic. The charioteer explained that the ascetic was one who had renounced the world and sought release from fear of death and suffering.

The Renunciation

For a time the Prince returned to palace life, but he took no pleasure in it. Even the news that his wife Yasodhara had given birth to a son did not please him. The child was called Rahul which means "fetter."

One night he wandered the palace alone. The luxuries that had once pleased him now seemed grotesque. Musicians and dancing girls had fallen asleep and were sprawled about, snoring and sputtering. Prince Siddhartha reflected on the old age, disease, and death that would overtake them all and turn their bodies to dust.

He realized then that he could no longer be content living the life of a prince. That very night he left the palace, shaved his head, and changed his prince's clothes for a beggar's robe. Then he began his quest for enlightenment.

The Enlightenment of the Buddha

Siddhartha sat beneath a sacred fig (*Ficus religiosa*), known ever after as the Bodhi Tree, and settled into meditation.

The work of Siddhartha's mind came to be mythologized as a great battle with Mara, a demon whose name means "destruction" and who represents the passions that snare and delude us. Mara brought vast armies of monsters to attack Siddhartha, who sat still and untouched. Mara's most beautiful daughter tried to seduce Siddhartha, but this effort also failed.

Finally, Mara claimed the seat of enlightenment rightfully belonged to him. Mara's spiritual accomplishments were greater than Siddhartha's, the demon said. Mara's monstrous soldiers cried out together, "I am his witness!" Mara challenged Siddhartha-- *who will speak for you?*

Then Siddhartha reached out his right hand to touch the earth, and the earth itself roared, "I bear you witness!" Mara disappeared. And as the morning star rose in the sky, Siddhartha Gautama realized enlightenment and became a Buddha.

Last Words

The Buddha tirelessly traveled and taught until his death at age 80. His last words to his followers:

"Behold, O monks, this is my last advice to you. All component things in the world are changeable. They are not lasting. Work hard to gain your own salvation."

The Essence of Buddha Teaching

After his enlightenment, he went to the Deer Park near the holy city of Benares and shared his new understanding with five holy men. They understood immediately and became his disciples. This marked the beginning of the Buddhist community.

For the next forty-five years, the Buddha and his disciples went from place to place in India spreading the Dharma, his teachings. Their compassion knew no bounds, they helped everyone along the way, beggars, kings and slave girls. At night, they would sleep where they were; when hungry they would ask for a little food.

Wherever the Buddha went, he won the hearts of the people because he dealt with their true feelings. He advised them not to accept his words on blind faith, but to decide for themselves whether his teachings are right or wrong, then follow them. He encouraged everyone to have compassion for each other and develop their own virtue, "You should do your own work, for I can teach only the way."

He never became angry or impatient or spoke harshly to anyone, not even to those who opposed him. He always taught in such a way that everyone could understand. Each person thought the Buddha was speaking especially for him. The Buddha told his followers to help each other on the Way. Following is a story of the Buddha living as an example to his disciples.

Once the Buddha and Ananda visited a monastery where a monk was suffering from a contagious disease. The poor man lay in a mess with no one looking after him. The Buddha himself washed the sick monk and placed him on a new bed. Afterwards, he admonished the other monks. "Monks, you have neither mother nor father to look after you. If you do not look after each other, who will look after you? Whoever serves the sick and suffering, serves me."

Buddha set forth his teaching in the following doctrine.

The Three Universal Truths

- 1. Nothing is lost in the universe**
- 2. Everything Changes**
- 3. Law of Cause and Effect**

One day, the Buddha sat down in the shade of a tree and noticed how beautiful the countryside was. Flowers were blooming and trees were putting on bright new leaves, but among all this beauty, he saw much unhappiness. A farmer beat his ox in the field. A bird pecked at an earthworm, and then an eagle swooped down on the bird. Deeply troubled, he asked, "Why does the farmer beat his ox? Why must one creature eat another to live?"

During his enlightenment, the Buddha found the answer to these questions. He discovered three great truths. He explained these truths in a simple way so that everyone could understand them.

1. Nothing is lost in the universe

The first truth is that nothing is lost in the universe. Matter turns into energy, energy turns into matter. A dead leaf turns into soil. A seed sprouts and becomes a new plant. Old solar systems disintegrate and turn into cosmic rays. We are born of our parents; our children are born of us.

We are the same as plants, as trees, as other people, as the rain that falls. We consist of that which is around us, we are the same as everything. If we destroy something around us, we destroy ourselves. If we cheat another, we cheat ourselves. Understanding this truth, the Buddha and his disciples never killed any animal.

2. Everything Changes

The second universal truth of the Buddha is that everything is continuously changing. Life is like a river flowing on and on, ever-changing. Sometimes it flows slowly and sometimes swiftly. It is smooth and gentle in some places, but later on snags and rocks crop up out of nowhere. As soon as we think we are safe, something unexpected happens.

Once dinosaurs, mammoths, and saber-toothed tigers roamed this earth. They all died out, yet this was not the end of life. Other life forms like smaller mammals appeared, and eventually humans, too. Now we can even see the Earth from space and understand the changes that have taken place on this planet. Our ideas about life also change. People once believed that the world was flat, but now we know that it is round.

3. Law of Cause and Effect

The third universal truth explained by the Buddha is that there is continuous changes due to the law of cause and effect. This is the same law of cause and effect found in every modern science textbook. In this way, science and Buddhism are alike.

The law of cause and effect is known as karma. Nothing ever happens to us unless we deserves it. We receive exactly what we earn, whether it is good or bad. We are the way we are now due to the things we have done in the past. Our thoughts and actions determine the kind of life we can have. If we do good things, in the future good things

will happen to us. If we do bad things, in the future bad things will happen to us. Every moment we create new karma by what we say, do, and think. If we understand this, we do not need to fear karma. It becomes our friend. It teaches us to create a bright future.

The Buddha said,

*"The kind of seed sown
will produce that kind of fruit.
Those who do good will reap good results.
Those who do evil will reap evil results.
If you carefully plant a good seed,
You will joyfully gather good fruit."*

.....*Dhammapada*

The Triple Jewel

The Buddha knew it would be difficult for people to follow his teachings on their own, so he established the Three Refuges for them to rely on. If a person wants to become Buddhists take refuge in and rely on the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. These are known as the Triple Jewel. The Sangha are the monks and nuns. They live in monasteries and carry on the Buddha's teaching. The word Sangha means 'harmonious community'. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha together possess qualities that are precious like jewels and can lead one to enlightenment.

The Buddha is the guide.

The Dharma is the path.

The Sangha are the teachers or companions along the way.

There is a special ceremony for taking refuge with the Triple Jewel. With a sincere mind, one recites the following verse in front of an ordained monk or nun.

I take refuge to Buddha

I take refuge to Dharma

I take refuge to the Sangha

For a Buddhist, taking refuge is the first step on the path to enlightenment. Even if enlightenment is not achieved in this life, one has a better chance to become enlightened in a future life. One who take the precepts is called a lay person.

Ethics of Buddhism

Ethics is basically a study of what it means to live the right way, or the study of how people should and do make decisions about moral issues. For Buddhism, ethics begins with the Buddha's *dharma* (or teaching), and in particular The Moral Precepts of Buddhism, which are part of the *Noble Eightfold Path*. These set out guidelines for how Buddhists should live, and describe what the ideal Buddhist life is like.

Ethics is the starting point of any meaningful spiritual development. The central idea of Buddhist ethics is that of karma, the principle according to which willed actions have consequences that depend on the state of mind in which they are committed. Actions performed on the basis of negative volitions, such as anger, aversion, greed and spiritual ignorance will at some point have a negative effect on the person committing them – and other people with whom that person comes into contact – causing suffering to all concerned. Conversely, actions performed on the basis of positive mental states, such as love, compassion and generosity, have a positive effect, resulting in states of happiness for the doer and others.

This has important implications. What it means, first and foremost, is that ethics is not dictated to us from outside by some kind of higher authority. There is no creator God in Buddhism, no external agency to punish us if we transgress; we are responsible for our own happiness and our own suffering. It also means that we can learn to be more ethical – Buddhism uses the term “skillful” to denote actions performed on the basis of wholesome states of mind, and “unskillful” for the opposite – and develop our capacity for ethics right up to the point of eliminating unskillfulness altogether. Positive mental states give rise to happiness, which in turn naturally gives rise to more positive mental states: a “virtuous circle” which results in ever happier and ever more skillful states of mind – with absolutely no limit.

A Buddha is incapable of acting unethically. The Enlightened mind is totally free of hatred, anger, greed and confusion. The natural expression of such a mind is compassionate action, and it is a mind that we too can cultivate. But we can't just spontaneously do this, which is why Buddhism suggests certain training principles, all of which are based on love.

All religions have some basic rules that define what good conduct is and what kind of conduct should be avoided. In Buddhism, the most important rules are the Five Precepts. The five ethical precepts practiced by Buddhists are principles that emulate the spontaneous behavior of an enlightened being and are based in a deep sense of interconnectedness and love. These have been passed down from the Buddha himself.

- 1. No killing (Respect for life)**
- 2. No stealing (Respect for others' property)**
- 3. No sexual misconduct (Respect for our pure nature)**
- 4. No lying (Respect for honesty)**
- 5. No intoxicants (Respect for a clear mind)**

- 1. No killing (Respect for life)**

The Buddha said, "Life is dear to all beings. They have the right to live the same as we do." We should respect all life and not kill anything. Killing ants and mosquitoes is also breaking this precept. We should have an attitude of loving-kindness towards all beings, wishing them to be happy and free from harm. Taking care of the earth, its rivers

and air is included. One way that many Buddhists follow this precept is by being vegetarian.

2. No stealing (Respect for others' property)

If we steal from another, we steal from ourselves. Instead, we should learn to give and take care of things that belong to our family, to the school, or to the public.

3. No sexual misconduct (Respect for our pure nature)

Proper conduct shows respect for oneself and others. Our bodies are gifts from our parents, so we should protect them from harm. Young people should especially keep their natures pure and develop their virtue. It is up to them to make the world a better place to live. In happy families, the husband and wife both respect each other.

4. No lying (Respect for honesty)

Being honest brings peace into the world. When there is a misunderstanding, the best thing is to talk it over. This precept includes no gossip, no back-biting, no harsh words and no idle speech.

5. No intoxicants (Respect for a clear mind)

The fifth precept is based on keeping a clear mind and a healthy body. One day, when the Buddha was speaking the Dharma for the assembly, a young drunkard staggered into the room. He tripped over some monks who were sitting on the floor and started cursing loudly. His breath reeked of alcohol and filled the air with a sickening stench. Mumbling to himself, he reeled out the door. Everyone was astonished at his rude behavior, but the Buddha remained calm. "Great assembly!" he spoke, "Take a look at this man! He will certainly lose his wealth and good name. His body will grow weak and sickly. Day and night, he will quarrel with his family and friends until they abandon him. The worst thing is that he will lose his wisdom and become stupid."

Little by little, one can learn to follow these precepts. If one sometimes forgets them, one can start all over again. Following the precepts is a lifetime job. If one kills or hurts someone's feelings by mistake, that is breaking the precepts, but it was not done on purpose.

The Four Noble Truths

Once there was a woman named Kisagotami, whose first-born son died. She was so stricken with grief that she roamed the streets carrying the dead body and asking for help to bring her son back to life. A kind and wise man took her to the Buddha.

The Buddha told her, "Fetch me a handful of mustard seeds and I will bring your child back to life." Joyfully Kisagotami started off to get them. Then the Buddha added, "But the seeds must come from a family that has not known death."

Kisagotami went from door to door in the whole village asking for the mustard seeds, but everyone said, "Oh, there have been many deaths here", "I lost my father", "I lost my sister". She could not find a single household that had not been visited by death. Finally Kisagotami returned to the Buddha and said, "There is death in every family. Everyone dies. Now I understand your teaching."

The Buddha said, "No one can escape death and unhappiness. If people expect only happiness in life, they will be disappointed." The Four Noble Truths

- 1. There is Suffering (Suffering is common to all).**
- 2. There is Cause of Suffering (We are the cause of our suffering)**
- 3. There is End of Suffering (Stop doing what causes suffering.)**
- 4. There is Path to end Suffering (Everyone can be enlightened)**

1. There is Suffering (Suffering is common to all).

Everyone suffers from these things

Birth- When we are born, we cry.

Sickness- When we are sick, we are miserable.

Old age- When old, we will have ache and pains and find it hard to get around.

Death- None of us wants to die. We feel deep sorrow when someone dies.

Other things we suffer from are:

Being with those we dislike,

Being apart from those we love,

Not getting what we want,

All kinds of problems and disappointments that are unavoidable.

The Buddha did not deny that there is happiness in life, but he pointed out it does not last forever. Eventually everyone meets with some kind of suffering. He said:

"There is happiness in life,

happiness in friendship,

happiness of a family,

happiness in a healthy body and mind,

...but when one loses them, there is suffering."

Dhammapada

Related to the nature of life is the nature of self. Are we not also temporary, conditional and compounded of many parts? We can understand that life is impermanent but are we, also, impermanent? The Buddha taught that before we can understand life and death we must understand the self.

2. There is Cause of Suffering (We are the cause of our suffering)

The Second Noble Truth teaches that the cause of suffering is craving or thirst (*tanha*). We continually search for something outside ourselves to make us happy. But no matter how successful we are, we never remain satisfied.

The Buddha taught that this thirst grows from ignorance of the self. We go through life grabbing one thing after another to get a sense of security about ourselves. We attach not only to physical things, but also to ideas and opinions about ourselves and the world around us. Then we grow frustrated when the world doesn't behave the way we think it should and our lives don't conform to our expectations.

The Buddha's teachings on karma and rebirth are closely related to the Second Noble Truth.

3. There is End of Suffering (Stop doing what causes suffering.)

The Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths are sometimes compared to a physician diagnosing an illness and prescribing a treatment. The first truth tells us what the illness is, and the second truth tells us what causes the illness. The Third Noble Truth holds out hope for a cure.

The Buddha taught that through diligent practice, we can put an end to craving. Ending the hamster-wheel chase after satisfaction is enlightenment (*Bodhi*, "awakened"). The enlightened being exists in a state called *Nirvana*. Nirvana is an everlasting state of great joy and peace. The Buddha said, "The extinction of desire is Nirvana." This is the ultimate goal in Buddhism. Everyone can realize it with the help of the Buddha's teachings. It can be experienced in this very life.

4. There is Path to end Suffering (Everyone can be enlightened)

The path to the end of suffering: The path to end suffering is known as the Noble Eightfold Path. It is also known as the Middle Way.

The Eight-Fold Path

The Eight-Fold Path lies at the core of Buddhist practice. It embodies the main principles of Buddhism and represents the middle way prescribed by the Buddha between asceticism and self-indulgence. The path entails three aspects: wisdom, morality, and meditation. Wisdom pertains to understanding the true nature of reality, that suffering is grounded in ignorance. Moral conduct is a way to purify one's actions, which also purifies one's motives. Meditation creates awareness and mental discipline. This path also embodies one of the main principles in Buddhist philosophy—nonviolence.

1. Right View: The right way to think about life is to see the world through the eyes of the Buddha—with wisdom and compassion.

2. Right Thought: We are what we think. Clear and kind thoughts build good, strong characters.

3. Right Speech: By speaking kind and helpful words, we are respected and trusted by everyone.

4. Right Conduct: No matter what we say, others know us from the way we behave. Before we criticize others, we should first see what we do ourselves.

5. Right Livelihood: This means choosing a job that does not hurt others. The Buddha said, "Do not earn your living by harming others. Do not seek happiness by making others unhappy."

6. Right Effort: A worthwhile life means doing our best at all times and having good will toward others. This also means not wasting effort on things that harm ourselves and others.

7. Right Mindfulness: This means being aware of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

8. Right Concentration: Focus on one thought or object at a time. By doing this, we can be quiet and attain true peace of mind.

The Eight-Fold Path underscores how ethics is essential to eliminate suffering.

Conclusion:

Buddha is the forerunner of modern Hindu social reformers in as much as most of the reforms which are considered essential in modern times were already advocated by Buddha in the sixth century. Here the Buddha's teaching was primarily ethical. He wanted to make men perfect. Among the religious thinkers of India the Buddha was almost the first to realize the importance of practical ethics in personal as well as in social life. Infact ethics was for him the main and fundamental basis of the good life even as reason was the ultimate criterion of truth.

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