

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BUDDHIST ETHICS IN MODERN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism represents a vast and rich intellectual tradition which, until recently, received very little influence from Western philosophy. This tradition contains a variety of teachings about how to live and what to do in various situations. Buddhism tells us to purify our own minds and to develop loving-kindness and compassion for all beings. The various forms of Buddhism offer systematic frameworks for understanding the traits of character and types of actions that cause problems for ourselves and others, as well as those qualities and actions that help to heal the suffering of the world. When starting a Buddhist path, one agrees to follow rules of moral discipline that forbid various destructive actions; but once the mind has reached a very high degree of spiritual development, the rules are transcended and one acts spontaneously for the benefit of others. The purpose of this paper to the way of understanding and activity of a Buddhist student with regard to oneself and the world around are only some factual illustrations of the objective of a traditional Buddhist education.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist Ethics, Buddhist Education, Buddhism, Modern Education

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of Buddhist ethics is to reach freedom from suffering by coming to see the world as it actually is and abandoning the distorted projections that our thoughts and emotions create. A very important means to reach this goal is to refrain from destructive actions, since these actions cause harm to others and create mental disturbances in us that generate suffering and keep us from seeing things as they are. Moreover, according to Buddhist teachings, those who reach the goal of freedom thenceforward act in a loving and compassionate manner towards others, helping these others in turn to be more happy and free. Ethical action is thus both an important part of the Buddhist path and an important aspect of the results said to flow from that path.

There is no word in Buddhist languages such as Sanskrit, Pāli and Tibetan that exactly corresponds to the English word “ethics.” The term most commonly translated as “ethics” is Sanskrit: *śīla* (Pāli: *sīla*, Tib: *tshul khrims.*) But this word actually means something more like “moral discipline”; someone has *śīla* when, having made a commitment to follow a certain set of moral rules, she is actually disposed to follow those rules.

Here then is a common ethical framework within which all Buddhist cultures, societies and individuals are invited to deliberate on the tasks of survival and flourishing. It invites all stakeholders in the ethics of the 21st Century to take their respective positions. It will lead to a common ethical vision and a process that must be nurtured in an open-ended way through dialogue mutual learning, and, above all, good will, namely “Relationship to Nature Human Fulfillment Individual and community justice” As we consider the alternative views on the nature of values, we need to assess the various methods of justifying value judgments. Here, come up the epistemological question: “How does one know?” Now, as we enter the field of axiology [the study of the nature, types, and governing criteria of values and value judgments], we rephrase the question and ask, “what sorts of reasons and what kind of thinking justify a value judgment. Such questions concern the

logics of ethics, and, logically speaking, they come first; when you say what you value, you imply a prior stand on how you value. However, psychologically speaking, the process is reversed. We make all sorts of Ethics in the sense of moral principles appeared very early in the Buddhist teachings. It may be said that they were formed ever since the Buddha and his immediate disciples gathered in one place for the purpose of studying and practicing his teachings. Accordingly, it is evident that Buddhist ethics originated from the practical needs of Buddhist monks in their pursuit of the path leading to the ultimate goal: liberation from suffering. Otherwise, ethics were set forth to meet the Sangha's needs in disciplining its members and assembling them under common conditions – living and working together in a highly democratic community. In this connection, Buddhist ethics have gradually grown into an indispensable part in structured Buddhist education.

Generally speaking, Buddhist education aims at training humans to liberate themselves away from suffering. This aim is formulated by the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths. After expounding these to his earliest disciples – proceeding from the First and Second Truths, he affirmed that there was a path overcoming the gloomy side towards the attainment of ultimate bliss. In order to achieve this aim, Buddhist followers are thus advised to strictly follow only this path. Accordingly, there are eight factors or conditions to fulfill, some of which are: Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood – considered the moral basis (*sīla*) for higher stages of discipline [further using concentration or *samādhi*, and wisdom or *paññā*]. Apart from this ethical foundation, various rules of conduct and discipline were circumstantially introduced throughout his preaching career. These rules served as favorable conditions to assist disciples to develop their individual discipline and for maintaining the perfected community. Such community was helpful in many aspects: facilitating the Buddha's task of preaching, providing a favorable seat of learning and practicing for his disciples; and served as the background of their mission of spreading the Buddha's teachings among masses – near and far. For such a community to be maintained and developed – it was necessary for all its members to observe certain regulations. The history of developments in Buddhism owes thanks and appreciation towards these monastic communities or *Sangha* in Buddhist terminology. The Buddha's teachings were disseminated and preserved through the monastic community – further accentuating how disciplinary rules have been so strongly emphasized in Buddhist monastic cultures. After the Buddha's passing away, rules were recollected and systematized into one of the “Three Baskets” of Buddhist literature, the *Vinaya-pitaka*.

Thus, the *Vinaya-pitaka* may be considered the most systematic and voluminous documentary evidence of Buddhist emphasis on ethics. There is no doubt that such an emphasis may be found not only in the *Vinaya-pitaka* but also in the other Baskets, since the Buddha's teachings are for all beings. In the *Sigalovada Sutta*, for instance, there are suggestions for moral conduct for lay-followers. These suggestions were formulated by the Buddha as necessary conditions for perfecting lay-follower's personality and good family; hence, another peaceful community. They are further summarized into the five principal precepts, observed by all Buddhist lay-people, these are: refraining from killing, not taking what is not given, refraining from prohibited sexual activity, refraining from unjust speech, abstaining from intoxicating substances.

These fundamental concepts demonstrate how Buddhist ethics cover three major fields of Buddhist education: (1) *individually*, they aim at helping a Sangha member with the process of purifying body and mind, serving as a means of developing his wholesome faculties (*kusala-indriya*) into favorable conditions of achieving the ultimate liberation; (2) *monastically*, they serve as the pivotal foundation for all sorts of Sangha's activities, and as unique support for any possible preservation and development of Buddhist Teachings in the world; (3) *socially*, in lay people's living they serve as basic conditions of making a morally perfect personality; hence, a happy family life and a peacefully developing country.

The Practical Value of Buddhist Ethics in Improving Individual and Community

All the above-mentioned positive characteristics of Buddhist ethics and their practical influence on human life may be easily recognized by any reader interested in the history of Buddhist development – inside and outside India. The most obvious evidence was given by the Buddha himself, immediate disciples, and the Buddhist monastic order over time. Numerous stories of the Buddha's former lives recorded in *Jataka*, and in the Buddha's lifetime through various Buddhist accounts – tell us: how and what he did towards saving other beings' lives; to liberate himself out of suffering; to realize the Perfect Enlightenment; to teach human beings and deities to improve themselves and the world in which they are living. For such a perfect personality as the Buddha's to be achieved, two essential qualities must not be lacking: compassion (*karuna*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Since the Buddha's lifetime, these two qualities nurtured Buddhist living, that is: living with monastic or lay followers, in a community of Buddhist monks, and also towards distinguishing types of Buddhist followers from the other. After the Buddha passed away, the Buddhist Sangha preserved and spread his message of compassion and wisdom. Internally, they continued to train themselves in accordance with what their Great Master had taught: morality developing parallel with wisdom. Externally, they tried their best to spread that message in Indian society at the time. It would not be an exaggeration for us to state that never previously before in the history of mankind has there been any message fraught with so much humanity as the message disseminated by the Buddha to Indian society at that time. In social life the message appeals for an immediate abolition of any possible discrimination of social and racial classes; in individual life, it appeals for a restoration of human freedom; that is: a total abandonment of any human bondage of an absolute Creator, a dominating Self, the worship of superhuman forces, rituals of sacrifice, and so forth. It affirms that the individual human alone, is responsible for all that he has done. Not any forces, whether natural or supernatural, can determine and arrange his destiny unless he voluntarily allows his own life to be conditioned by them. This illustrates the primary and final freedom that the Buddha's message intends for humanity.

In the world's history such freedom could be obviously expressed in the personality of Emperor Asoka in India in the 3rd century BCE. As the supreme sovereign of a vast empire, Asoka possessed rampant power and authority to make final decisions of which various contemporary systems of morality were implemented towards improving and developing his vast empire. There were then for his selection at least two major moral systems flourishing in India, that is: traditional morality and Buddhist morality. The former accrued the submission of humans towards the Absolute Being (*Brahman*) through the worship of all kinds of gods, discrimination of racial and social classes, the sacrifice of animals, and so on. The later, on the contrary, is based totally on the principle of causal dependence. All that creates a sentient being is what he has done and is doing; in other words, it is the *status quo* of all his actions of mind, speech and body that makes him what he is. Not any God, not any superhuman forces, not any designations, not any social conventions but all the mental and physical constituent conditions of a human's existence decides what he truly is. On this guiding principle, Buddhist ethics are formed to help human beings improve themselves by transforming such constituent conditions of their existence from evil to good, from imperfect to perfect. In the Buddhist view it is only with such a transformation that a perfect personality can be truly made, a good family can be formed, and a peaceful and prosperous country can be founded. The existent edicts by the Emperor Asoka, inscribed on rocks and stone pillars, reveal his decision; and historical accounts tell us about how a bloodthirsty conqueror was transformed into a benevolent, brilliant emperor as well as an empire in incessant warfare into a peaceful and prosperous India.

A Practicable Application of Buddhist Ethics to Education in the Modern World

The afore-said illustrations may, to some extent, present the positive and practical influence of Buddhist education upon human society during the course of its development. For the past decades the Buddhist Sanghas together with their

lay devotees in many different countries have made their great efforts to preserve and develop this educational tradition. Based on the universal development of the world today, it may be said that their efforts aim at not only preserving an educational tradition that was founded more than two thousand years ago but also making, through this tradition, some possible contributions to the development of the world. Today, this development, in spite of its different forms in different countries and regions of the world, has a common point with the West – since the Renaissance and the East in the past century – both have developed along materialistic lines. In the course of such developments, there is no doubt that various things are being replaced with others in both the environmental and human fields. The increasing deterioration of our environment along with its global changes of climate, atmosphere, ecological and geological conditions, and so on, may be too evident for all of us to deal with. The point mentioned here is the change of moral and spiritual values in human society, which takes its root in the change of education. In order to serve the development along the afore-said lines there have undoubtedly been some changes in the educational field of modern world, of which the most remarkable is of the objective of education. Generally speaking, in modern education, students are for the most part trained and educated to become *not free* and *perfect* people, but specialists in many different branches of work and study, as well as in many different fields of social life. There is little doubt that such a tendency in education has proceeded from the requirements developing the world. We have few ideas of giving any remarks on its pragmatic value in modern living. The point demonstrated here is that such education methods indicate that student-specialists, in a certain field, will hardly have a perfect understanding of other fields, including himself – not as a physical structure or a psychological organism, but as an extremely complicated individual of mental and physical operations in relation with others in a community. For that reason, in order to have a rather general knowledge, the student-specialist must gather additional information supplied by specialists in other fields. Accordingly, most of the information he has gathered is provided not from his insight into the true essence of things but either from other sources or from his superficial grasping of the phenomenal world – often as interpreted by others. Although this information may then be regarded as nothing other than a description of things, it is extremely necessary for him because all of his ideas, thoughts, decisions, feelings, and sensations can hardly be formed or raised without it. In this case it would be hard for him to think or feel freely; instead, his thinking and feeling are raised and restricted within a certain fixed pattern, logical or psychological, formed in his mind not by his personal experience but by descriptions [*often provided by others*], alone. In Buddhism, such a process of cognition is considered to be based on the view of things not “as they are” but “as they have passed into the past”. Hence, the student-specialist possesses nothing other than collected-delusions. For everything is in constant change. In this way, the more knowledge one gathers, the more separated from reality one is; the more personally-engaged with the phenomenal world, both physical and psychology, the more strongly one is controlled by “name” (*nama*) and “form” (*rupa*) -losing control of himself unconsciously. By “unconsciously” we mean that he is not aware that feelings are being controlled not by oneself but by patterns defined by educational and social conventions. One’s thinking is directed not by personal insight but by descriptions collected from all that has passed away. So one may be doing something wrong but thinks it would be right; one may be doing something harmful to oneself and others, but firmly believes it is useful.

As a student born and raised in one of the most powerful countries of the world, for instance, one feels satisfied with: the pure environment in which he is living, with the academic institution he is attending, with the modern education he is receiving, with the well-developed industry and technology whose products he is enjoying. He would be satisfied with these things; and he would be kind enough to wish that all the underdeveloped countries in the world may soon be well developed as his country. But, ironically, he never wishes he could learn from the knowledge collected from the educational and the phenomenal world, or from personal-insight -the true cause and state of his country’s development, and its global influence in every aspect of life on earth. He knows that his country’s environment is kept pure, but he never asks

himself how it may be kept as such with so many harmful chemical and industrial wastes thrown away every day by well-developed industry; and so forth. As a student supposedly to have been educated to love peace and hate war, one is willing to join demonstrations to protest war in some distantly-removed place across the world. After demonstrating, one is comforted because of this small contribution to the movement of making peace in the world. Through this recent act of selflessness, through being concerned with other people in the world; and with such thoughts, one can feel quite comfortable and sleep soundly afterward. He never knows that wars already erupting can never be stopped with demonstrations, a great number of demonstrations, or a worldwide appeal for peace. One never comprehends that it can only cease through halting all the conditions that created the disruption – including the so-called modern educational system in which he has been trained. Certainly he would not and could not accept the last idea previously suggested unless insight is gained into the inner-relations between this system of education and all the current crises on earth.

From the Buddhist view: the modern education, in spite of its variety of systems and structures in different countries in the world, will not and cannot help to stop crises and conflicts caused by current world developments. The single reason for this is that *it is not intended to do this*. In this education-system, a student is educated:

- Not to free himself out of his negative states of mind, which arise from the two abiding, deep-rooted ideas within himself, which is: self-protection and self-preservation. For self-protection he has to depend upon the force of something else as a safe support, such as a family, a gathering of friends, a group of colleagues, a community of people sharing the same race or belief or nationality, and so forth. For self-preservation he has to seek for wealth and power. From these two ideas there accrue various volitions, good or bad, which control and direct his actions of thinking, speaking and acting. Accordingly, when he is educated to love or serve, for instance, there is no doubt that he must love or serve himself first, then his relatives, his friends, his colleagues, his native land, his country, etc. Such a love or service is, of course, quite reasonable because it accords with many concepts he has been taught concerning the protection and preservation of himself, of his family, of his organization, of his company, of his nation, and so on. The noteworthy point is that if his love or service arises from his consciousness of self-protection and self-preservation, it may inevitably cause negative frustrations or conflicts, first within himself and then in the world around. To gratify his unwholesome desires, for instance, he is ready to reject his good volitions, if any. To preserve himself as a whole he may reject his relatives. To protect his family he may reject his friends, and so on.
- Not to be perfect. By “perfect” it means, in Buddhism, perfect understanding (paññā). Perfect understanding is the understanding of something, not by description of it but by insight into it. All that may be felt, conceived, or grasped by human beings are viewed in Buddhism as conditioned; that is to say, they are formed by at least two conditions. They can arise neither from only one condition nor from no condition at all. In this connection, a conditioned thing arises in a twofold existence: its form and its nature. So for a thing to be fully comprehended, both its form and nature must be penetrated. On the absolute level, it does not have its own nature or self-nature, in Buddhist terms, because it is conditioned. Relatively, however, its nature refers to all the conditions that are being combined with each other to give its form. Thus a perfect understanding is an insight into the currently changing conditions of a thing, which manifests under certain forms, and at the same time into the absence of what is conventionally called “self-nature.” For such an understanding to be achieved, a student must be disciplined to get rid of all kinds of his own experience, psychological, logical and even intellectual, during the course of his cognition; for it is due to the intervention of his experience that distorts his true understanding, hinders him from getting an insight into a thing as it is.

A human being viewed in such light is nothing other than physically and mentally changing conditions, bearing a distinct name and certain form – distinguishing one from another. Thus, in appearance one exists as an independent being from others; yet, in essence indifferent from others because there is no self-nature. As a result, a true understanding means an insight into the operation of mental and physical conditions, moment after moment. This illustrates the fact that our understanding of ourselves and the world around is quite relative, and thus not perfect, since it arises not from direct experience but from our experience of what has passed away. We have discussed in brief two characteristic features, i.e., freedom and perfection of the Buddhist educational tradition, in which an individual is considered an inseparable part of the world. From this fundamental standpoint, the preliminary requirement for a Buddhist student is learning how to control oneself first – that is to say, gain knowledge of the general operation of physical and particularly mental factors within. Upon this knowledge, one becomes disciplined to weaken step by step and then abandon unwholesome states of mind, which affect and distort true understanding of oneself and the world around. At the same time, arousing and strengthen wholesome states of mind, which may overcome frustration and conflicts caused by unwholesome states becomes necessary. In such a process of discipline, the mind is gradually kept calm long enough to penetrate deeply into the phenomenal world including all that is taking place within and with the external world. This penetrating view is absolutely important towards comprehending the true nature of phenomena – causes and conditions, mutual relations with others, and thus the way of treating or dealing with situations. In addition, these activities serve as the foundation for Buddhist students in every aspect of individual and social life. If students understand that there is not a so-called “evil person” but only evil volitions or evil actions which arise within that person, self-love would arise easily and naturally as evident in other so-called “good people.” If understanding causal dependence of all so-called “nations” in the world, conventional values of geographical boundaries, living and working conditions of humanity on the same planet – one would never accept the idea that war must be made somewhere else on earth to help preserve peace in one’s own country; that conflicts in every aspect of social life must be activated in some countries to help preserve the economic development of one’s own country; that the pristine environment of some nation must be sacrificed for the pure environment of one’s own country, and so forth.

Contributed to Current World Developments by Teachings of Buddha

Before giving the answer, let us confirm the fact that Buddhism in general has never aimed at changing the whole world. The world as it is arises and disappears owes nothing to the arising and disappearing of its own conditions, including mankind and its activities. So it is not any God, not any superhuman force but humanity deciding the destiny of this planet. Upon this principle, the only thing Buddhism can do is to show or remind humanity how and what they have to do to preserve the world and all kinds of life living on it, as great as possible. So far, if humans lack true comprehension of the true nature of the world and the true cause of the world, they will never find out an appropriate way to change the world. All these things were already introduced to mankind over twenty five centuries ago, by Buddha Gotama, the Sakyamuni. Yet, how many people across the world have attempted to study and apply these techniques towards the development of themselves and the world? From the Buddhist view, development in the true sense of the term does not and cannot mean the increase of delusions, selfish desires, hatred, jealousy, pride, impurity, frustrations, conflicts, warfare, terrors, famine, natural disasters, and the like. If all of these things may be regarded as part of the whole current development of the world, Buddhism will not and cannot contribute anything to it. Instead, Buddhism is making its greatest efforts to preserve and develop its educational tradition in many different forms: a temple, a monastery, a school, a college, a university, a center of Buddhist culture, a meditation institution, and so on, for the purpose not of contributing to but attempting to balance the world’s development – that is, to become a constructive institution among numerous destructive conditional-elements within this present global-system. For that reason, it must not be misunderstood that Buddhist

institutions of all kinds have been built to introduce Buddhist teachings as branches of learning, such as: philosophy, religion, theology, psychology, ethics, educational methodology, etc., to the world -just as it was ever suggested that techniques of Buddhist meditation might be applied to the increase of production labor in factories. Buddhist education is characterized by the consistent combination of learning and discipline. Therefore, it is no use to think that Buddhist teachings, the whole or some part of it, should be chosen as a branch of learning, or as a department, or as a faculty among the others of a certain college or university. For if limited, it will then provide for the world, not free and perfect beings, but specialists in Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Psychology, etc., even in Buddhist Ethics. These specialists may acquire an excellent knowledge of Buddhism in every aspect; yet, they will surely go on to contribute to numerous crises of the world – since their existence among humanity remains being founded on self-protection and self-preservation. Therefore, it may be rather obvious for us to demonstrate practicable solutions to what was presented so far – based upon facts. Buddhist ethics, or rather, Buddhist moral principles, can maintain their intrinsic worth and practical functions only in those achieving some level of positive transformation in their states of mind.

It may prove that Buddhist ethics cannot be separately employed as an independent subject from others in a certain curriculum. Instead, it must be applied in connection with Buddhist philosophy, with Buddhist meditation in the sense of the practice of insight, and with the discipline of transforming physical and mental conditions individually. All these applications, therefore, must be carried out in a single course, which is opened not in parallel with other courses, but as the fundamental course for all others. Naturally, for such a system of education to be effectively carried out, it is to require, in the first place, much more effort from every Buddhist Sangha in different countries. For, on the one hand they have to preserve their current monastic academic institutions so as to be able to provide expert instructors for those ‘Buddhist’ courses; on the other hand, they have to found by themselves Buddhist colleges and universities for both Buddhist and non-Buddhist students who want to be trained in such an education system. In these new institutions, of course, students may have to choose, apart from the Buddhist course, other required courses. In reality, it is hard for the educators in non-Buddhist academic institutions to expect some prospect for such a model of education.

CONCLUSIONS

The presentation above concerning the way of understanding and activity of a Buddhist student with regard to oneself and the world around are only some factual illustrations of the objective of a traditional Buddhist education. For more than two thousand and five hundred years those who have been educated and disciplined in this educational system have never waged war of any kind, in any place – on this planet. Instead, they perform for the benefit of humanity and deities – exactly in accordance with the advice of their Compassionate Teacher. The reason for this may now be no longer misunderstood by those who would question if Buddhist teachings might be purely individualistic, pessimistic, nihilistic, etc. In summary, it should be affirmed again, that Buddhist teachings in general and Buddhist ethics in particular, existent on earth for more than two millennia, are not intended to present humanity with a utopian-system of education or society; nor are they intended to become the greatest religion or philosophy that should dominate humanity. The Buddha Sakyamuni’s message to humanity conveys the significance of compassion and wisdom. A decision to choose the Heavenly-Kingdom or the Darkness of Hell depends entirely upon all of humanity.

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