

BUDDHIST APPROACH TO ETHICAL EDUCATION

by Baidyanath Labh*

ABSTRACT

Buddhism may be deemed as an ethical sojourn beginning with an individual (The Buddha) to and ending at the complete cessation of suffering synchronizing with mundane as well as supra mundane bondages, passing through education towards all.

Seeing the miseries of human beings, Siddhārtha Gautama was deeply moved and consequently renounced all worldly pleasure that he was enjoying, sought for spiritual guidance from different scholars and saints of his time, underwent severe penance and finally attained the supreme knowledge (Samyak Sambodhi) at Bodhgaya.

However, his journey did not stop there and his social concern took him to Sarnath to educate and enlighten his erstwhile friends (Pañcavaggiya bhikkhus).

The interesting part of his education was its foundation on ethical values. He himself clarified to his first five disciples that his enlightenment was not theoretical or academic, rather based on spiritual practices (bhāvanā), that he got in twelve ways-identification, resolution and practice (each truth in threefold ways).

His noble eightfold path (summarized as sīla, samādhi and Paññā) are obviously indicative of a moral path. Sīla purifies physically and vocally and prepares a sound and suitable base for mental purification,

*. Prof., Vice-Chancellor, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, (Deemed University) Ministry of Culture, Government of India, Nalanda – 803111 (Bharat), India.

which is achieved through meditation (Pali jhāna, skt. = dyāna). The practice of meditation leads the practitioner to concentration (samādhi). It stops mental distraction, stabilizes mind and brings mental purification and peace.

Thereafter the practitioner gets enabled for introspection and deeper understanding of himself and external phenomena, which ultimately leads to the right understanding (sammādiṭṭhi) or wisdom (paññā) and through that nibbāna the summum bonum.

Even in day to day life of a recluse as well as a laity, Buddhism impacts education based on ethical values, as knowledge is without morality is bookish or theoretical and morality without proper knowledge is misleading. The author intends to highlight the significance of moral or ethical education as perceived in Buddhism.

Morality and ethics are two terms we come across very frequently in our day to day life. Perhaps, these two define a personality, attitude, outlook and behaviour of an individual. Loosely, both are taken in the similar sense, but if seen minutely the difference comes visible. From a derivative angle, moral or morality has its origin in the Greek word 'Mos' which means custom. On the other hand 'Ethics' is also derived from a Greek word 'Ethikos' which denotes the sense of 'character'. In other words, 'moral' or 'Morality' indicates to the custom established by group of individuals whereas 'ethics' defines the character of an individual.

While comparing the two terms, we observe that morals are the beliefs of an 'individual' or group as to what is right and what is wrong; whereas Ethics indicates the guiding principles which help an individual or group to decide what is good and what is bad. While morals are concerned with principles of right or wrong; ethics is related to right or wrong conduct of an individual in a particular situation. Furthermore, morals are governed by social and cultural norms, whereas ethics is governed by individual or legal and professional norms. Moral principles deal with right and wrong, whereas ethical norms deal with right and wrong conduct. Moral may differ from society to society and culture to culture, whereas in the case of ethics there is uniformity in general rules

and statements, whereas ethical principles are abstract. In nutshell, morality deals with what is right or wrong and ethics deals with what is good or bad.

Before coming to the core issue of Buddhist ethics and ethical teachings, it seems pertinent to understand the concept of 'Ethics'. Ethics as a discipline is indeed a branch of philosophy that deals with the fundamental principles of conduct of an individual or group. They function as guiding principles as to identify and ascertain what is good or bad.

They are the standards which govern and regulate the life of a person. Some ethical principles may be identified as: Truthfulness, honesty, loyalty, respect, fairness, integrity and so on. Every single individual has some principles which help him throughout his life to cope up with any adverse situation. They are known as ethics.

Ethics may be viewed from philosophical and religious perspectives. In the context of Buddhism 'Morality' and 'Ethics' cannot be put into two watertight compartments. Here we find the Buddha establishes morality and ethics as the two sides of same coin. Whether it is case of an individual or group of individuals, the norms are similar in Buddhism.

The Buddha is of the view that whatever one thinks, speaks or acts upon, is rooted in *kusala mūlas* (moral roots) or *akusala mūlas* (immoral roots).¹ A thought or action originated from moral roots is known as moral thought or moral action; whereas the ones originated from immoral roots may be identified as immoral ones.

If the gist of all the Buddhas' message is to be presented, it may be said –

*“Sabbapāpassa akaraṇaṃ kusalassa upasamadā/
Sacittapariyodapanam, etaṃ Buddhānasāsanam//”²*

Not to commit any sinful or immoral act, and act upon meritorious or moral act and thereby purify one's own character is the gist of the Buddhas' teachings.

1. Tīṇi kusalamūlāni alabho adoso amoho ... Tīṇi akusalamūlāni lobho doso moho'ti.

2. *Dhammapada*, verse No. 183 (5/14).

Buddhism in this light may be deemed as an ethical sojourn beginning with individual (Siddhārtha Gautama to the Gautama Buddha or Samyak Sambuddha) who gives up all his ease and comforts of royal life, and resorts to renunciation in search of identifying the nature, cause and lasting redressal of the problem of suffering which inflicts everyone without exception now and then. Siddārtha was enjoying all ease and comforts available at his time which normally everybody aspires for, but the mystery of the problem of suffering could not keep him satisfied and ideal. Why they occurred and how they could be got rid off was a burning question for his mental rest. The four well described scenes assigned to as the potential, possible and immediate reasons for his renunciation were disturbing him and proved as catalytic factors for the same.

When the Buddha attained *Samyak Sambodhi* at Bodhgaya, he was not much enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge with others, not because he had no concern for others, but because he was aware of the subtlety and profundity of the knowledge gained by him. *Sahampati Brahmā* expresses his feeling of remorse before the Buddha that once upon a time people in Magadha were pure hearted and ethical in their behaviour; but lost their purity because of resorting to unethical practices. As a result, *dhamma* disappeared from the region and people got deeply engrossed with immoral and unethical acts. Consequently they lost their capability to grasp the moral and ethical teachings. That indeed developed disinterest in the newly enlightened Buddha. However, he agreed to the request of *Sahampati Brahmā* to preach and share his thoughts with others on the assurance that there were still some people who were less corrupt or comparatively of better understanding, and the Lord should preach them his moral teachings so that they could also get benefitted.³

Taking thread from the first turning of the wheel of Righteousness (*Paṭhamadhammacakkappavattana*) at *Isipatanamigadāya* (modern Sarnath), we can decipher the elements of ethical teachings contained in the Buddha's teachings. Very clearly he says to his disciples that

3. "Desetu, bhante, Bhagavā dhammaṃ, desetu Sugato dhammaṃ. Santi Satta apparajakkhajātikā, assavanatā dhammassa parihāyanti, bhavissanti dhammassa aññātāro'ti." Ibid. pp.8-9.

whatever he has achieved is not an academic knowledge, but to be acted upon and rest assured, if done so emancipation from all sorts of suffering is guaranteed and that too in this very life.⁴

Needless to repeat, the Buddha's path passes thought self-purification in threefold ways, viz, *Sīla* (morality or ethical values) manifested through physical and vocal moral actives (*kāyika kusalakamma* and *vācasika-kusalakamma*), *Samādhi* (concentration) practiced and actualized through meditational practices, and *paññā* (wisdom) symbolizing and culminating into total purification and clarity about threefold characteristics of phenomena (impermanence, suffering and substancelessness) synchronizing into emancipation or complete freedom from suffering.

The Buddha's path as already mentioned combines within itself morality and ethics both. They are not separate from each other at least in the Buddhist scheme of things. Accordingly purification of the body, speech and mind are important for individuals as well as for mass. Here morality and ethics are identical. Personal ethics set down for individuals are equally useful and applicable to the mass morality. If a person does not set right himself ethically, how could he expect for mass morality?

As clarified earlier, ethics stands for the guiding principles which help an individual or group to decide what is good or bad. In this light Buddhist ethics sets some general principles common to every individual; and if every individual is involved or guided by the same, they become universally applicable to all.

The Buddha lays equal emphasis on theory (*pariyatti*) and practice or application (*paṭipatti*). So ethical teachings have their importance in day to day life with equal weightage. If either of the two gets weakened, the authority or composition of the both too get affected. Attributing such significance, the Buddha says that theory without practice is hoax or meaningless. A person who merely knows doctrines is like an empty vassal or a cowherd who takes the cattle of his master to the grazing ground in the morning

4. "Yathānusiṭṭhaṃ tathā paṭipajjamānā nacirasseva yassatthāya kulaputtā sammadeva agāasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajanti tadanuttaraṃ brahmacariyapariyosānaṃ ditṭhevadhamme sayāṃ abhiññā sacchikatvā upasampajja viharissathā'ti." *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

and takes them back in the evening to the master's cowshed. He himself does not become the master of those cattle –

*“Bahumpi ce saṃhitam bhāsamāno, na takkaro hoti naro pamatto/
Gopo'va gāvo gaṇayam paresam, na bhāgavā sāmāññassa hoti /”*⁵

On the contrary, even if a person knows a little bit of the Holy Scriptures, but acts upon them sincerely with truthfulness, is indeed the shareholder of ethical life and its good fruits.⁶

Ethics is, therefore, necessary for a noble and meaningful life. It teaches the doctrine of positivity and creativity, it brings stability and strength in individual as well as community life. Its necessity and significance can be understood in our day to day to day life as well. Buddhist ethics is based on the principles of sacrifice (*alobho* or *cāgo/Skt. tyāga*), good will, friendliness or loving kindness (*adoso/Skt. adveṣa* or *mettā/Skt. maitrī*) and right understanding (*amoho*) of everything. If a person develops all these qualities, obviously born out of three moral roots (*kusala hetus*), his conduct in all respects becomes refined and balanced; his vision gets matured in all possible manners. He realizes his own merits and demerits and perfects himself in balanced and matured behaviour with others. The Buddha very rightly says that a person who is awakened, mindful, performs right actions wisely, is well restrained in his senses etc. earns name and fame in life –

*“Uṭṭhānavato satimato sucikammassa nisammakārino /
Saññatassa ca dhammajīvino, appamattassa yasobhivaḍḍhati /”*⁷

While leading an ethical life, a person should focus on his own merits and demerits, and have introspection instead of peeping into activities of others. Pointing out at others' demerits may lead to scuffle, criticism, hatred and even enmity, whereas doing the same for one's own self develops the sense of confession, self-realization and purification –

“Na paresam vilomāni, na paresam katākatam,

5. *Dhammapada*, verse No. 19 (19/1).

6. *Ibid*, Verse No. 20 (20/1).

7. *Ibid*, Verse No. 24 (4/2).

Attano'va avekkheyyaṃ, katāni akatāni ca/ /"⁸

Highlighting the benefits of an ethical way of life, the Buddha says that as a colourful scented flower is liked by everyone; similarly true, sweet and meaningful speech is also liked by everyone.⁹

Further, as a garland is made of various flowers, similarly, a man should perform multiple moral actions –

*“Yathāpi puppharāsimhā kayirā mālāguṇe bahū/
Evaṃ jātena maccena, kattabbaṃ kusalaṃ bahuṃ/ /”*¹⁰

The Buddha cautions against resorting to immoral actions and reveals that the Buddhas' teachings manifest through abstinence from slandering, non-injury or non-violence towards everyone, compliance on the *Pātimokkha* rules set for leading virtuous life, taking food in moderate quantity, sleeping and making sincere efforts for concentration in solitude etc. –

*“Anūpavādo anūpaghāto Pātimokkhe ca saṃvaro/
Mattaññutā ca bhattasmim pantañca sayanāsanam/
Adhicitte ca āyogo etaṃ Buddhānaṃ sāsanaṃ/ /”*¹¹

Thus, in the Buddhist scheme of things what is ethically applicable to an individual is also applicable to the group – whether a family, work place, society, playground, school, college, university, state, nation or even the entire globe. *Alobha*, *adosa* and *amoha* are active everywhere. If thought, speech and physical actions originate and are measured in an individual case, why and how can they, be different in the case of mass?

When we consider the possible necessity and reasons to observe ethics and ethical practices, it becomes clear that everybody wishes to get pleasure and comfort only and not pain, discomfort or adverse condition in life. So, if we do not do good to others how can we expect good in response? The Buddha, therefore, divulges that since everybody is afraid of pain, punishment and death and

8. *Ibid*, Verse No. 50 (7/4).

9. *Ibid*, Verse No. 52 (9/4).

10. *Ibid*, Verse No. 53 (10/4).

11. *Ibid*, Verse No. 185 (7/9)

life is dear to everyone, taking one's own instances, one should not resort to violence to anybody –

*“Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesaṃ bhāyanti maccuno/
Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye/
Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbesaṃ jīvitaṃ piyaṃ/
Attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye//”*¹²

The world has been full of such instances in the past as well as in the present, wherein we find several dictators— cruel, and tyrant, inhuman, enjoying power of their authority with the false notion that they will never get defeated or die. The Buddha reminds them and cautions not to do so and mend their ways. He clearly says that such persons cannot get pleasure or bliss after their death. We have seen such dictators in different parts of the world who lived their life of cruelty but met pathetic end—

*“Sukhākāmani bhūtāni yo daṇḍena vihiṃsati/
Attano sukhamesāno pecca so labhate sukhaṃ//”*¹³

Harming or hurting others is not a noble way, rather it is a symbol of unethical and immoral way. The Buddha says that a person who resorts to killing or any sort of violence cannot purify himself. So, a person must adopt the path of good-will, loving kindness and compassion with a self-motivated compassionate outlook. These are the real qualities that make one civilized, cultured, refined and rather noble:

*“Na tena ariyo hoti, yena pāṇāni hiṃsati/
Ahiṃsā sabbapāṇānaṃ ariyo'ti pavuccati//”*¹⁴

Life of an individual cannot go smooth without feeling concern for others, simply because of the fact that he is dependent on others for his material needs. If he has to build his house he purchases land and building materials from others, engages labours and masons, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, applies for water connection and so on so forth. He depends upon others for food, water,

12. *Ibid*, Verse Nos. 129-30 (1-2/10).

13. *Ibid*, Verse No. 131 (3/10)

14. *Ibid*, Verse No. 270 (15/19)

cloth etc. Even the road and railways he uses for commutation are constructed by others; vehicles, trains, planes etc. are all designed, manufactured and operated by others. Thus, he should inculcate a mind of positivity and cooperation, which itself generates and brings into picture ethical or moral values. This way it is amply clear that even if a common man thinks and acts with selfish mind and profit making attitude, he must act ethically. He has to evolve the notion of 'live and let others live'. This is indeed the key word for ethical or moral life.

While pondering and meditating over the problem of suffering, the Buddha found that 'ignorance' (*Pāli avijjā/Skt. Avidyā*) is the root cause of all suffering. It is *avijjā* due to which a person creates attachment for various objects of lure and which consequently generates suffering.

We perform innumerable actions of different natures with a selfish desire of reciprocation or return. At the level of day to day life, the element of selfish thinking and expectation of desired result is very much active and visible. However, the Buddha's path is somewhat different. Without having indulgence into worldly desires, the Buddha wishes to take the suffering humanity to the state of eternal bliss. His path is anti-current (*Paṭisotaḡāmī*) and not easily visible by the common people who are deeply engrossed in worldly desires. That is why he gets disinterested initially in sharing his knowledge with commoners.¹⁵

However, once he accepts *Sahampati Brahmā's* appeal to preach; he goes to Sarnath and delivers his first sermon to his five erstwhile companions, who had deserted his company after he had accepted sweet pudding from Sujātā. Number of his disciples goes on increasing strictly and when it reaches sixty (excluding the Buddha himself) and all attain the stage of arahathood; the Buddha finds it appropriate to instruct his learned and emancipated monk disciples to spread out in different directions with the role objective of

15. 'Kicchena me adhigataṃ, halaṃ dāni pakāsituṃ/
Rāgadosaparetehi, nāyaṃ dhammo susambuddho//
Paṭisotaḡāmiṃ nipuṇaṃ, gambhīraṃ duddasaṃ aṇuṃ/
Rāgarattā na dakkhanti, tamokkhandhena āvuṭṭā'ti.//” *Mahāvaggapāli, op. it., p. 7.*

disseminating his noble message to more and more people without any limitation for their benefit and well-being. If they remain bereft of listening to the Buddha's words of noble *dhamma* (of course full of ethical and moral values) they will be in big loss.¹⁶

It is the prime objective of the Buddha's life that people learn the message of real or proper truth and misunderstanding about life. The Lord enthuses his followers by saying not to expect help from others or emancipation through any other means but to have self-confidence and self-help.

*"Attanā hi attano nātho, ko hi nātho paro siyā/
Attanāva sudantena nātham labhati dullabham//"*¹⁷

And the path is the same noble eightfold middle path meant for the will-being and benefit of one's own as well as of others.

It is a well-known fact that the Noble eightfold Path can be summarized into three steps as *sīla* (virtue, ethics, morality etc.), *Samādhi* (concentration) and *Paññā* (wisdom or right understanding). As indicated earlier, these three steps involve ethical discipline. Out of the Noble eight steps right view (*Sammāditṭhi*) and right resolution (*Sammā Saṅkappo*) come under the purview of wisdom (*paññā*); right speech (*samma vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanto*), and right livelihood (*sammā ājīvo*) are constituents of virtue or ethical discipline (*sīla*); and right endeavour (*sammā vāyāmo*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right concentration (*Sammā Samādhi*) are covered by concentration (*Samādhi*). Out of these three steps ethics or ethical discipline (*sīla*) takes care of restraining and purifying physical and vocal actions (*kāyika* and *vācasika kamma*), concentration (*Samādhi*) takes care of mental actions (*mānasika kamma*), and wisdom (*Paññā*) further purifies mind, clears delusions, misunderstanding, confusion etc., dispels darkness, generates the light of knowledge, and finally emancipates

16. "Caratha, bhikkhave, cārikaṃ bahujaṇahitāya bahujaṇasukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ. Mā ekena dve agamittha. Desetha, bhikkhave, dhammaṃ ādikalyāṇaṃ majjhakalyāṇaṃ pariyoṣānakalyāṇaṃ sātthaṃ sabyañjanaṃ kevala pari-puṇṇaṃ parisuddhaṃ brahmacariyaṃ pakāsetha. Santi Sattā apparajakkhajātikā, assavanatā dhammassa parihāyanti bhavissanti dhammassa aññātāro." *Ibid.*, p. 25.

17. *Dhammapada*, verse no. 161 (5/12).

the practitioner from all sorts of bondages of the repeated existence. Consequently he realizes that he has already attained the supreme stage (*nibbāna*) after having exhausted the chain of birth and rebirth and also that there won't be rebirth anymore.¹⁸

Ethical discipline, morality or virtue (*sīla*) is just like foundation stone of a building. If foundation is not strong, building will remain weak, this is applicable in case of morality or ethical discipline also, as it provides a sound base or background to mind to practice and develop concentration (*samādhi*). *Nāgasena* says:

*'Ayaṃ patitṭhā dharaṇi'va pāṇinaṃ,
idañca mūlaṃ kusalābhivuddhiyā/
mukhañcidaṃ sabba jinānusāsane,
Yo sīlakkhandho varapātimokkhiyo//'*¹⁹

This is the foundation like the earth to humans. This is the root of increase in goodness, this is the beginning of the all the Buddhist teachings. This is the moral precept as laid down in the Excellent *Pātimokkha*. While elaborating the importance of *sīla*, *Samādhi* and *paññā* in the Buddhist practice, *Buddhaghosa* too introduces *sīla* in the same sense-

*'Sīle patitṭhāya naro sapañño, cittaṃ paññaṃ ca bhāvayaṃ/
Ātāpi nipako bhikkhu, so imaṃ vijaṭaye jaṭaṃ'ti//'*²⁰

It is due to practice of *sīla* that we refrain from committing immoral or unethical deeds and instead perform moral or ethical deeds, Thus *sīla* disciplines us in respect of physical and vocal actions.

Normally we perform even moral actions with expectations of getting return in terms of financial gain, praise, position etc. Buddhist threefold steps of *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā* teach us something different and new. In the beginning elements of gain whether financial or otherwise do exist; but gradual practice of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* help in reduction and ultimate destruction of expectation

18. "khīṇā jāti vusitaṃ brahmacariyaṃ, kataṃ karaṇiyaṃ nāparaṃ itthatāy'ti pajānāti'ti." *Mahāvaggaṇāḍī*, op. cit., 19,40, 255 and at many other places.

19. *Milindapañhapāli*, Igatpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, p.

20. *Visuddhimagga* by *Buddhaghosa*, Swami Dwarikadas Shastri (ed.), Varanasi; Bauddha Bharati, 1977, p. 1.

or greed. Thereafter a stage comes when the practitioner continues to perform meritorious deeds but without any expectations, desire or greed. His actions become desireless or selfless action with no clinging and no bhava. This stage may be identified as the stage of *sa-upādisesa nibbāna*, when only the five aggregates (or in other words mind-and-body) remain to service. Finally, when even the five aggregates or mind-body combo decays and dies the *nibbāna* is called *anupādisesa nibbāna*.

While preaching, the Buddha talks to his disciples to get knowledge about the reality of life and come out of ignorance that has grinded or exceeded them and cause different types of sorrow. The second part of his teachings is to act upon, practice or follow up. Therefore, doctrine/teaching (*pariyatti*) and practice (*paṭipatti*) both are equally important in the eyes of the Buddha. Further physical and vocal actions are visible to others but mental actions are not so. It may be experienced by the doer only. However, the Buddha educates such persons also by means of practicing concentration and developing wisdom, which may be considered as the further steps of ethical or moral education.

If we look at the Buddhist education system that occurred and advanced simultaneously with the formation and development of monastic system we notice that monks and nuns had to lead their daily life according to Vinaya rules. The observances of Uposatha ceremony every fortnight worked as a check on the activities of inmates and provided opportunities to confer one's guilt if at all committed and rectify the same so that spiritual journey and holy life could go hand in hand.

When the Buddhist educational institutions at Nālandā, Odantapurī, Vikramasīlā, Telhara, Valabhī, Jayendra vihāra, Somapura, Jagaddala etc. came into existence, they all functioned and developed on the basis of ethical code of conduct imparting knowledge in various fields like literature (*Sanskrit-Pali*), Philosophy, *Nyāya* (Logic), Astrology, Mathematics, Medicine, Grammar etc.

Concludingly, it may be said that the Buddhist approach to education goes hand in glove with ethics and knowledge. Buddhism upheld the high motto of knowledge with high moral character and an altruistic outlook.