

THE BUDDHIST ANALYSIS OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MEDITATION (*BHĀVANĀ*) IN PROMOTING ETHICAL EDUCATION IN THE MODERN SOCIETY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moral virtue (*sīla*) and meditation (*bhāvanā*) are essential components of the Buddhist way of life. For example, their importance is highlighted clearly in the Dhammapada (110) by saying that a day of a person who follows moral precepts and meditates is better than a hundred years of person who has immoral behaviour and does not meditate. In the very basic teachings of the Noble Eightfold Path also they are presented together as a path which leads to attainment of Nibbāna. In the Four Noble Truths, this path which consists of virtue and meditation is the fourth Noble Truth. Among these two components, virtue is generally shown as the foundation of meditation. For instance, in the Jaṭā Sutta (Saṃyutta i, p.13), it is clearly pointed out that the practice meditation should have the foundation of moral precepts. However, if the Pāli texts are examined carefully, it can be observed that they exist depending upon one another reciprocally. The practice of one is not complete without the other. The most noteworthy one is their comparison to washing one hand with the other (Dīgha i, p.117). There are several other texts from which their close relationship can be understood.

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For instance, in the nine precepts, the cultivation of loving-kindness (*mettā*) is included. Here, the meditation forms a part of ethical practice. In Buddhist meditation, the practice of loving-kindness is a tranquility meditation (*samatha bhāvanā*). Furthermore, reflection of one's virtue (*silānussati*) is itself a form of contemplation through which one can develop concentration (*Visuddhimagga* i, p.215). It means that virtue and meditation cannot exist in a mutually exclusive way. They exist in co-dependence upon one another. In this paper I present the argument that meditation should become an important component of ethical education. The foundation of ethics is made stable only through the cultivation of mind which is done through meditation.

2. ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL ACTIONS

In Pāli, wholesome actions are sometimes referred to by the terms '*kalyāṇa*' (good) and '*puñña*' (merit) (*Āṅguttara* iv, p.88). Their opposites are '*pāpa*' and '*apuñña*'. The word '*pāpa*' (evil or harmful) also signifies '*apuñña*' (*Suttanipāta*, p.636), and is usually presented as opposite of '*kalyāṇa*' (*Vinaya* iii, 72). There are many criteria which makes a certain action unwholesome or unethical. Based upon the points mentioned in the *Bāhitika Sutta* (*Majjhimanikāya* ii, p.114), *Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta* (*Majjhima* i, pp.415ff), *Kālāma Sutta*, and *Veludvāreyya Sutta* (*Samyutta*, v, p.353 ff), the following five criteria probably summarizes them all:

1. Unwholesome
2. Blameworthy because of association with defilements
3. Brings injury or harm to oneself and others
4. Brings painful results and consequences
5. Unwholesome states increase and wholesome states decrease

For instance, if an action increases unwholesome states, brings painful result, and is blameworthy, then it is unwholesome. In the *Dvedhāvitakka Sutta* (*Majjhima* i, p.115), two more criteria can be found: makes the wisdom to cease (*paññānirodhiko*) and does not take towards Nibbāna (*anibbānasamvattaniko*). It means that unwholesome actions weaken or annihilate wisdom and keeps a

person away from Nibbāna. The actions that are opposite of these can be considered as ethical actions.

Regarding this, Venerable Buddhaghosa explained ‘wholesome state’ as ‘freedom from sickness’ (Aṭṭhasālīnī, p.80) and also as ‘freedom from distress or anguish’ (*niddara*) (Dīghanikāya Aṭṭhakathā iii, p.883). The first refers to the healthy state of mind and the second refers to peace of mind. Their opposites are the characteristics of unwholesome state. Thus, wholesome actions lead to peace and freedom from distress and anguish.

Here, it should be mentioned that there are several terms in Pāli that indicate ethical and unethical actions. For instance, ‘*kusala*’ (wholesome) and ‘*akusala*’ (unwholesome), ‘*succarita*’ (good conduct) and ‘*ducarita*’ (bad conduct), ‘*puñña*’ (merit) and ‘*apuñña*’ (demerit), ‘*sukaṭa*’ (well-done) and ‘*dukaṭa*’ (ill-done). It is noteworthy that they are used not only for the verbal and bodily actions but also for actions of mind. Usually, the mental action does not come within the scope of virtue. For example, the term ‘misconduct’ usually means the unwholesome verbal and bodily actions. But in the Pāli text, this term applies also to actions of mind. It means that in the broader sense of ethics in Buddhism, virtue consists of bodily, verbal, and mental actions. Similarly, ‘good conduct’ also applies to all the three doors of action (Majjhima ii, p.64). This shows that the action of mind should be considered as equally important in the ethical consideration as the bodily and verbal actions.

3. MEDITATION AND VIRTUE IN THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH (AṬṬHAṄGIKA-MAGGA)

The eight factors of Noble Eightfold Path can be grouped into three Noble Trainings: ‘training of wisdom’ (*paññā sikkhā*), ‘training of virtue’ (*sīla sikkhā*), and ‘training of concentration’ (*samādhi sikkhā*). In the usual classification of Noble Eightfold Path, right view (*sammā ditṭhi*) and right thought (*sammā saṅkappa*) are classified as ‘wisdom’ (*paññā*); right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*) as ‘concentration’ (*samādhi*); and right action (*sammā kammanta*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), and right livelihood (*sammā*

ājīva) as ‘virtue’ (*sīla*). With relation to the theme of this paper, they can also be classified into meditation and virtue, namely the first five belong to meditation and the remaining three belong to virtue. Similar way of classification can also be found in the Suttanta texts. For example, in the *Samathavipassanā Sutta* (Saṃyutta ii, 535), the Buddha pointed out that ‘*samatha*’ and ‘*vipassanā*’ comprise the way leading to the attainment of Nibbāna. Here, these two factors obviously represent the two trainings, which I have classified into one category as meditation. Thus, when it is said that one practices meditation, it refers to cultivating these five factors. Similarly, when it is said that one lives an ethical life, it refers to following the three factors related to virtue. In Pāli, the three trainings of the Noble Eightfold Path are presented as a way leading cessation of suffering, suggesting that they should be cultivated together (Majjhima iii, p. 346). This also shows that virtue and meditation are interdependent.

As mentioned above, in the context of Noble Eightfold Path, virtue refers to abstinence from bodily misconducts, verbal misconducts, and wrong livelihood. These three are called ‘aggregate of virtue’ (*sīlakkhandha*). There are three bodily misconducts, namely killing living beings, stealing, and sensual misconduct; and four verbal misconducts, namely lying, malicious speech, harsh speech, and vain talk. Although several kinds of wrong livelihood are clearly mentioned in the discourses, in simple terms, wrong livelihood means making a living which involves bodily and verbal misconducts. The inclusion of the precept related to livelihood in the Noble Eightfold Path shows that abstaining from wrong livelihood is a very important ethical practice in Buddhism. Therefore, in the ethical education, livelihood should become an important subject matter. In the modern society, lack of proper ethics in earning livelihood is a grave problem. This problem can be addressed by incorporating the teachings of right livelihood in the ethical education.

The scope of ethical behavior is very broad. There are some kinds of ethical behavior which has to be done and there are unethical behaviors which has to be abstained from (Bodhi, 1994, p.23). In Pāli, they are called *cāritta sīla* and *vāritta sīla* respectively (Visuddhimagga i, p.11). In a general sense, they can be understood

as doing wholesome actions and abstaining from unwholesome actions. In Buddhism, ethical behavior refers to these both. In this paper, I limit myself to the meaning of virtue as 'abstaining from unethical behavior' as mentioned in the Noble Eightfold Path. In some contexts, such kinds of virtue are also called 'abstinences' (*virati*) (Narada, 1987, p.78). In this context, virtue basically refers to keeping precepts which comes within the scope of the three factors of moral training (*sīla sikkhā*). The five precepts are also included in them, except the abstaining from alcohol and other intoxicating things. But it is understood in the factor of wrong action. The *cāritta sīla* consists mainly of duties that should be fulfilled with relation to different kinds of social relationship. In the ethical education, both of these should be given equal importance.

In a broad sense, the Pāli term '*bhāvanā*', which is the Pāli term for meditation, refers to cultivation of any wholesome state. In the context of meditation, it mainly refers to cultivation of concentration and wisdom. In this paper, I limit the interpretation of the term 'meditation' as the activity of cultivating the five factors of the Noble Eightfold Path which I have referred to as 'meditation.'

In the Noble Eightfold Path, the word 'meditation' represents the three factors of the 'aggregate of concentration' (*sīlakkkhandha*) and two factors of the 'aggregate of wisdom' (*paññākkhandha*). There are four types of right efforts: effort to prevent the unwholesome states from arising, effort to abandon unwholesome states that have arisen, effort to develop wholesome states that have not arisen yet, and effort to maintain and cultivate wholesome qualities that has already arisen. In brief, right effort basically involves dispelling the unwholesome states and cultivating wholesome states. Here, the unwholesome states refer to defilements, and the thoughts, emotions, and intentions derived from them, which may appear in the bodily and verbal actions or just remained confined in the mind (Bodhi, 1994, p.32). If they get expressed through bodily or verbal actions, then a person's ethical precepts are broken. The aim of meditation is to dispel these unwholesome states, thereby preventing them from breaking forth into verbal and bodily action. Thus, it is obvious that meditation should become a part of ethical education.

4. THREE LEVELS OF ACTION (*KAMMA*)

In order to understand the relationship between meditation and virtue, it is essential to examine the three levels of action taught in Buddhism. They are: actions of body (*kāyakamma*), actions of speech (*vacī kamma*), and actions of mind (*manokamma*). In a general consideration, only the actions of body and speech come within the scope of ethics. This is because the primary task of virtue is to restrain overt unwholesome actions committed by body and speech. For instance, the three factors of morality in the Noble Eightfold Path mentioned above are related only to actions of body and actions of speech. But in Buddhism mental actions are always important in any consideration of ethics. To clarify this, the Buddha himself said that “volition is action” (*cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi*) (Aṅguttara iii, p.415). “Volition comes into being through any of three channels – body, speech, and mind – called the three doors of action (*kammadvāra*)” (Bodhi, 1994, p.11). It means that it is the volition of mind that instigates actions of body and speech (Majjhima Aṭṭhakathā, p.37). Therefore, actions of mind are very crucial.

Furthermore, the Buddha declared that among the unwholesome actions done by three doors, the action of mind is the most faulty and blameworthy compared with the action of body and the action of the speech (Majjhima ii, p.34). This is because the verbal and bodily actions have their origin in mind (Dhammapada, 1-2). Although the scope of ethics is mainly within body and speech, it is noteworthy that in the Pāli texts all the three are considered as ‘good conduct’ (*sucarita*) and ‘misconduct’ (*duccarita*) depending upon their ethical quality. For example, there are ten types of unwholesome action: three bodily misconduct, four verbal misconduct, and three mental misconduct. Here, the actions of mind have been called ‘misconduct’.

Actions of mind play important role in the practice of ethics, both in restraining the unwholesome actions of the body and speech and also in doing wholesome actions. How mind plays important role in the committing of unwholesome action can be observed in the Paṭhamasañcetanika Sutta (Aṅguttara iii, p.497):

“There is a threefold corruption and failure of bodily kamma, arisen from unwholesome volition, having a painful outcome and result; a fourfold corruption and failure of verbal kamma, arisen from unwholesome volition, having a painful outcome and result; and a threefold corruption and failure of mental kamma, arisen from unwholesome volition, having a painful outcome and result.”

Here it has been clearly pointed out that unwholesome volition is the root cause of unwholesome actions. “Thought is the forerunner of action, directing body and speech, stirring them into activity, using them as its instruments” (Bodhi, 1994, p.16). In order to live an ethical life, one needs to have virtuous verbal and bodily conducts. However, as actions spring from mind, the most crucial point here is cultivation of wholesome states of mind.

5. ROOTS OF UNETHICAL ACTIONS

As it has been pointed out above, the root causes of bodily and verbal actions exist in the mind. Just as unwholesome states of mind generate unwholesome actions, wholesome states of mind generate wholesome action. In the context of the Buddhist ethics of abstaining from unwholesome actions, in order to prevent unethical actions, it is very important to weaken and remove the unwholesome states of mind. With relation to Noble Eightfold Path, the three kinds of wrong thoughts are causes of unwholesome actions (Saṃyutta iii, p.1). They are: thoughts of sensual desire (*kāma vitakka*), thoughts of ill-will (*byāpāda vitakka*), and thoughts of inflicting harm (*vihiṃsā vitakka*). Therefore, in order to prevent unwholesome bodily and verbal action, it is important to know how to remove unwholesome thoughts.

In several discourses, it has been shown clearly that the mental states such as three unwholesome roots, namely, greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), are primary causes of unwholesome actions including the inability to keep the basic five precepts of ethical life (Aṅguttara i, pp.189, 201ff). These three unwholesome roots can be understood as the primary unwholesome states from which other unwholesome emotions, thoughts, and mental states arise. Showing their connection to the basic precepts, in the Kesamutti Sutta, these roots are pointed out

as primary causes due to which a person fails to undertake the five basic codes of ethical life (Aṅguttara i, p189). Furthermore, among various causes that can make a person to engage in certain verbal or mental misconducts, the roots are pointed out as greed, hatred, and delusion (Aṅguttara i, p.201ff).

According to Abhidhamma, in the three kinds of wrong thought also, the basic factors are greed, hatred, and delusion. The unwholesome bodily and verbal actions are expressions of unwholesome mental states, and their primary causes are the three unwholesome roots. Thus, it is essential to learn ways to remove the three unwholesome roots. There are numerous discourses that show the ways to remove them. For instance, in the Aññātitthiya Sutta (Aṅguttara i, 201), three causes are mentioned for the removal of the three roots. ‘Sign of foulness’ (*asubhanimitta*) is for greed, ‘liberation of mind by loving-kindness’ (*mettā cetovimutti*) is for ‘hatred’, ‘wise attention’ (*yonisomanasikāra*) is for ignorance. Peter Harvey noted that ‘wise attention’ refers to wise, systematic, appropriate, focusing on the fundamental nature of the object’ (Harvey, p.181).

In the Taṇhā Sutta (Aṅguttara v, p.116), unwise attention (*ayonisomanasikāra*) is shown as the cause of lacking in mindfulness (*sati*) and clear-comprehension (*sampajañña*). The lack of these two becomes the cause of lack of sense restraint (*indriya-asaṃvara*). It in return becomes the cause of three types of bad conducts (*duccarita*). Thus, unwise attention as well as lack of sense restraint are also primary causes of unethical behavior.

In the Micchatta Sutta (Aṅguttara v, p.211), wrong view (*micchā diṭṭhi*) is shown as the cause of wrong thought (*micchā saṅkappa*), which then causes wrong actions of speech and body to arise. Here, among many meanings of ‘wrong view’, the one that causes wrong action is mainly the views such as there are no good or bad actions and they do not produce any result (Dīgha i, p.55). On the other hand, abstinence from unethical conduct is based upon the knowledge as to what action is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what action is reprehensible and what is not, what action leads to welfare and what to harm (Dīgha iii, 157). The knowledge of this distinction as well as what causes them is pointed as right view (Majjhima i, 46)

(Bodhi, 1994, p.11). Besides, wisdom uproots the deep roots of greed and hatred and of delusion (Harvey, 2000, p.200). Thus, right view and right thought are essential components which support ethical conduct.

6. HOW MEDITATION CAUSES ETHICAL CONDUCT?

In the Buddhist training, virtue is considered as the beginning step and the foundation. “It (virtue) is the foundation for the entire path, essential for the success of the other trainings.” (Bodhi, 1994, p.22). The importance of virtue in the entire Buddhist training can be observed in the following passage from *Dīghanikāya* (ii, 68):

“This is virtue; this is concentration; this is wisdom. Concentration which is cultivated on the foundation of virtue is of great result and great advantage. Wisdom which is cultivated on the foundation of concentration is of great result and great advantage. When the wisdom is cultivated well, the mind becomes free from cankers, that is from the canker of sensual desire, from the canker of becoming, and from the canker of ignorance.”

In this passage, virtue is shown as the foundation upon which concentration and wisdom are developed. The point as to how virtue helps in training of the mind and in turn affects one’s bodily and verbal actions have been expressed by Harvey thus: “One who keeps them (moral precepts) increasingly comes to express positive virtues as the roots of unwholesome action are weakened” (Harvey, 2000, pp.67–68). He mentioned correctly that by keeping the moral precepts, one weakens the unwholesome roots. For instance, with regard to speech, right speech decreases unwholesome mental states and increases wholesome ones (Harvey, 2004, p.276). As a result, one’s verbal and bodily actions become increasingly positive. “Through abstinence from unwholesome actions, the defilements which lead to them are restrained, and their opposites are strengthened.” Bhikkhu Bodhi has also made a similar observation: Virtue helps to obtain preliminary purification of mind (Bodhi, 1994, p.23)

Similarly, there are numerous discourses showing the necessity of cultivating mind in observing the moral precepts related to verbal and bodily actions. It is very apparent that in order to observe the

moral precepts, the three factors of concentration group are very essential. For instance, mindfulness is needed for the practice of virtue related to sense restraint (*indriyaśamvara*) (Visuddhimagga i, p. 21). As making exertion to dispel unwholesome states is one of the aspects of right effort, it obviously plays important role. In the same way, one of the objectives of concentration is to dispel hindrances and other unwholesome mental states. This prevents the expression of mental unwholesome states through speech and body.

However, if the Pāli texts are scrutinized carefully, it can be observed that virtue and wisdom actually do not exist in a mutually exclusive way. They are interdependent. Highlighting the way in which virtue and wisdom help one another the Buddha said in the Sonadaṇḍa Sutta (Dīgha I, p.117):

“Just as one may wash one hand with the other, or one foot with the other, so wisdom is cleaned by virtue and virtue is cleaned by wisdom. Where there is virtue, there is wisdom; where there is wisdom, there is virtue. One who is virtuous has wisdom; one who has wisdom has virtue.”

Here, ‘wisdom’ refers to the insight that arises through meditation. The term cleaned (*paridhota*) means ‘washed thoroughly’ or ‘purified’. Although in the highest sense, the way in which wisdom helps to purify virtue refers to the attainment of supramundane states (Dīgha i, p.117) (Dīgha Aṭṭhakathā i, p.260), its meaning can be extended to the knowledge which leads to that attainment. Thus, the preliminary insight knowledge is also included here (Dīgha Aṭṭhakathā ii, p.127).

How meditation helps in keeping precepts can be observed in the following passage from Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta (Majjhima i, p.415):

“Rāhula, bodily action should be done after repeated reflection; verbal action should be done after repeated reflection; mental action should be done after repeated reflection.”

In this Sutta, the Buddha said that one should reflect before doing any action, while doing any action, and after doing any action. It is very obvious that the training in meditation is essential to engage in these three kinds of reflection. A person who has not trained in meditation will find it almost impossible to have these reflections.

Mindfulness and clear-comprehension, the lack of which leads to unethical actions, are key factors in meditation. The importance of mindfulness and clear-comprehension in the practice of moral virtue is highlighted by including them with the training of virtue in the discourses such as *Sāmaññapphala Sutta* (*Dīgha I*, p.66). In the context of Noble Eightfold Path, in order to be able to restrain from unethical actions, one has to see the intention as well as the three types of wrong thoughts which, if not observed mindfully, manifest in speech and action. Mindfulness makes one aware of one's actions and motives (Harvey, 2004, p.270). This makes a person to choose the right course of action. Furthermore, virtue also helps in cultivating mindfulness. For instance, keeping the fifth precept aids right mindfulness (Harvey, 2004, p.277). The mindfulness and clear-comprehension which are developed through meditation play very crucial role in observing moral precepts.

The antidotes of the three roots of unethical behaviors are non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). In the Noble Eightfold Path, they come within the scope of right view and right thought. Just as the roots of unethical actions are in the mind, the antidotes of unethical actions are also mainly in the mind. For example, each of the five unethical actions, which refers to breaking the five basic precepts, have their counter-actions and they are primarily mental states: kindness, generosity, contentment and fewness of wishes, honesty, and mindfulness (Harvey, 2000, p.68). Here, it is noteworthy that the three kinds of positive thoughts which are opposite of negative thoughts are renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion (Bodhi, 1994, pp.17–21). They are also primarily mental states. With relation to the latter two thoughts, it is impossible for anger to linger in the mind when one cultivates the four divine abodes (*brahmavihāra*) (*Dīgha iii*, p. 280). Here, the meditation practices which concern the four divine abodes such as loving-kindness are shown as ways to remove the root of ill-will or anger. Furthermore, right view not only dispels ignorance, but also causes three right thoughts to arise.

One of the important training necessary to live an ethical life is restraint of faculties (*indriya saṃvara*). In this connection, what is noteworthy is that mindfulness and clear comprehension have to

be applied to restrain the senses. When they are absent, the latent defilements of craving and ill-will emerge (Bodhi, 1994, p.34). Thus, it is important to cultivate mindfulness and clear comprehension through the practice of meditation.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the three unwholesome roots are causes of unethical actions and their removal is essential in living an ethical life. As these roots can be primarily removed from the mind with the help of meditation practice, it can be said that meditation plays the most significant role in the observance of ethical guidelines. Moral virtue mainly concerns verbal and bodily actions, and their source is in the mind.

In the Buddhist way of life, ethical conduct is the foundation on which the whole spiritual practice rests upon. Ethical conduct concerns mainly the verbal and bodily actions. But as it has been pointed out that virtuous behaviors require mindfulness and clear comprehension, there is undoubtedly important role played by the mental action in keeping precepts. As the wholesome states, which are antidotes of unwholesome roots, are developed through meditation, it would not be wrong to say that meditation influences virtue more than virtue does to meditation.

Finally, as ethics involves various cognitive aspects such as motivation, emotions, thoughts, and views, meditation cannot be excluded from its discussion. For one of the goals of meditation is to remove unwholesome thoughts and emotions. Removing unwholesome mental states through meditation is essential in order to commit oneself to wholesome ethics. From the perspective of Noble Eightfold Path, in order to live an ethical life, it is essential to cultivate right effort, right concentration, right mindfulness, right thought, and right view. Thus, in order to promote ethics in modern society, it is very important to include meditation in the ethical education and training.

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