

# THE PRACTICE OF DHAMMA: A BUDDHIST APPROACH TO GLOBAL EDUCATION IN ETHICS

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by Ravindra Panth\*

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The Conflict-ridden society of the present day is indeed, in need of Global Education in Ethics in order to live a Peaceful, Happy and Harmonious living. No doubt, with the scientific and modern material advancement we may be living a life of ease and comfort on one hand but on the other hand we have so much submerged in materialism that our lust and desire for material wealth, power and pleasure has made us greedy and devoid of the ethical values. Further, there is no empirical evidence to support the assumption that social and economic progress based on a materialistic conception of life can ensure the happiness and well-being of humanity. With the modern material advancement, present day Society has become more complex with the multifarious contemporary issues creating conflict in every sphere. This is mainly due to the degradation of the moral values in the present-day Society. As a result, we are facing Social, Economic, Political, Religious and even Ecological problems. The so-called Modern Man is under tremendous stress, mental anxiety and psychological problems – Dukkha – Suffering.

Buddhism provides the answer for such issues and prescribes the practice of the Middle Path, which the Buddha calls as Dhamma in Pali (or Dharma in Sanskrit). According to the Buddha, Dhamma

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is the only panacea and the Practice of Dhamma is the Right approach to the Global Education in Ethics. There is no alternative to 'Dhamma'. This is the eternal truth – *Esa Dhammo sanantano*<sup>1</sup>. This can be well understood, if we understand the real meaning of the term 'Dhamma' as given in our ancient Indian texts with the direct practice of it, as indicated in the Buddhist texts. This will certainly help to make the norms set out in the Global Ethics - such as non-violence, compassion, human solidarity, tolerance, equality etc. in the lives of people. For the entire humanity which is facing wide spread decline of moral values, a crisis of character, on slaughter on women, violence and many other ills, adherence to "Dharma" alone is the remedy. It alone can destroy sinful thoughts, establish moral authority and make people follow the righteous path, and thus save the nation and humanity from catastrophe.

Before I discuss the Practice of Dhamma: A Buddhist Approach to Global Education in Ethics, let us first understand the meaning of the term 'Global Education in Ethics'. In generic sense the term is defined as a moral philosophy or code of morals practiced globally by persons or group of people, communities, primarily for the smooth way-faring in the world, where people can live happily, peacefully and harmoniously like one family on earth – *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam*<sup>2</sup>.

The term also refers to a set of moral values taught to enhance one's perception of the world. It can be taught within the curriculum where teachers integrate multiple dimensions, perspectives, and citizenships into everyday lessons. This will enable people to participate in shaping a better, shared future for the world and emphasizes the unity and interdependence of human society, developing a sense of self and appreciation of cultural diversity, affirmation of social justice and human rights, as well as building peace, harmony and actions for a sustainable future. The Dhamma provides all these elements.

In the Indian tradition the Sanskrit word Dharma or Pali word Dhamma has a special significance. On account of its antiquity,

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1. Dhammapada Pali, verse 5, Nalanda edition, 1960.

2. *Maha Upanishad* translated by Dr. A. G. Krishna Warriar, 1953, Published by The Theosophical Publishing House, Chennai, India.

utility and universality the very mention of that word rouses the conscience of an individual in the land wherever the Dhamma is practiced by the people of that land. I very much feel that our present-day problems are a direct result of disregarding 'Dhamma', under the influence of a materialistic philosophy, in the belief that it alone can usher in happiness and secure the welfare and well-being of the people.

The Pali term Dhamma is a multi-significant term. It is derived from the root verb *Dhr* (*dhāreti*) which means 'to hold' or 'to sustain' which is its general meaning. In the Indian tradition the Pali word Dhamma has a special significance and a unique expression of the widest import. There is no corresponding word in any other language like the expression Dhamma. It would also be futile to attempt to give any definition of the word. It can only be explained. It has a wide variety of meanings. A few of them would enable us to understand the range of that expression. For instance, the word 'Dharma' is used to mean Justice (*Nyāya*), what is right in a given circumstance, moral values of life, pious obligations of individuals, righteous conduct in every sphere of activity, being helpful to other living beings, friendliness towards all being, giving charity to individuals in need of it or to a public cause or alms to the needy, natural qualities or characteristics or properties of living beings and things, duty and law as also constitutional law and also the law of nature, the eternal law. In true sense Dhamma incorporates: the phenomenal world as it is; the laws of nature; the duties to be performed in accordance with the laws of nature; the results of fulfilling such duties.

In Mahabharata the great Indian epic on being asked by Yudhisṭhira to explain the meaning and scope of Dharma, Bhishmapitamah who had mastered the knowledge of Dharma replied thus:

*"It is most difficult to define Dharma. Dharma has been explained to be that which helps the upliftment of living beings. Therefore, that which ensures the welfare of living beings is surely Dharma. The learned rishis have declared that which sustains is Dharma."*<sup>3</sup>

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3. Mahābhārat, Shanti Parva - 109-9-11.

Karna Parva eulogizes Dharma in the following words:

*“Dharma sustains the society, Dharma maintains the social order Dharma ensures well-being and progress of Humanity. Dharma is surely that which fulfils these objectives.”<sup>4</sup>*

The Buddha defines the Dhamma in the following verse of Dhammapada<sup>5</sup>:

<i>Sabba pāpassa akaraṇaṃ,</i>	<i>not to perform evil deeds,</i>
<i>kusalassa upasampadā.</i>	<i>to perform wholesome deeds.</i>
<i>sacitta pariyodapanam,</i>	<i>to purify the mind,</i>
<i>etaṃ buddhāna sāsanaṃ.</i>	<i>this is the teaching of the Buddhas.</i>

Precepts, which form the foundation of morality is the integral part of Dhamma in Buddhism and serve as an interface between an individual and other beings, thereby, working as a tool to avoid conflict. The Dhamma is founded on the understanding of the interconnectedness of all phenomena and hence it relates to the root and fruit of all actions. Essentially it serves to protect the one who protects or observes them – *Dhammo have rakkhatu Dhammacāri*.

Therefore, Dhamma embraces every type of righteous conduct covering every aspect of life essential for the sustenance and welfare of the individual and society and includes those rules which guide and enable those who believe in the Ultimate Truth or nature and attainment of nirvana, the Enlightenment. “Dhamma, on the external level, refers to the path of practice, the Buddha taught to this followers”. Broadly speaking Dhamma refers to three levels of meaning: the words of the Buddha, i.e., *Buddha Vacana (Pariyatti)*, the practice of his teaching (*Paṭipatti*), and the attainment of the experience (*Paṭivedana*). So, Dhamma is not just doctrines - it is teaching, its practice and also the realization or enlightenment. “It includes not only the conditioned things and states, but also the non-conditioned, the Absolute Nirvana. There is nothing in the universe or outside, good or bad, conditioned or non-conditioned, relative or absolute, which is not included in this term.”<sup>6</sup>

4. *Ibid.* Karna Parva- Ch. 69 Verse 58.

5. *Dhammapada Pali*, verse 28, Nalanda edition, 1960.

6. *What the Buddha Taught*, Walpol Rahula, Grove Press, 1974, p. 58.

Thus, the underlying meaning refers to ‘universal law’ which sustains and governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma can best be translated as ‘law of nature’, a term that captures both its main sense namely, as the principle of order and regularity seen in the behaviour of natural phenomena and also the idea of universal moral law whose requirements have been revealed by the Enlightened beings such as the Buddha.

The distinctive feature of Dhamma is that it should be capable of being realized at the experiential level through insight and applied in daily life. Unless Dhamma becomes applicable in daily life, it will be like a flower that is lovely and beautiful to look at, but does not emit any fragrance.

With the proper application of Dhamma in daily life, one is bound to get amazing results. When this starts happening, one begins to realize sooner rather than later that applied Dhamma is nothing but an art of living, as it keeps one happy and contented in all situations.

Although Dharma is universal and nothing to do with sectarianism, the misconception that these are one and the same has prevailed in India for a long time and still continues. We must understand that Dhamma or Dharma doesn’t mean Religion. Religion is personal to individuals, and left to their belief. One can join or change a religion according to one’s urge and desire. But the respect for all religions is Dharma. Dharma is universal, it applies to all whether they belong to any religion or not. It is a code of conduct for all human beings for all time to come. It is eternal and unalterable just as one cannot alter the characteristic of fire which is burning or heat.

Even in the Buddha’s time there were people who would use such terms as “my dhamma” and “another’s dhamma”. They called their own dhamma perfect and the other’s dhamma imperfect. Thus contending, the quarrel with each other. They consider their own depositions to be true. To guard people against such statements, the Buddha gave a clear and succinct message to the Kālāmas, who also felt perturbed by similar talk on certain occasions:

“Now look, you Kālāmas. Be not misled by report or tradition

or hearsay. Be not misled by proficiency in any scripture, or by reasoning or logic or reflection on and approval of some theory, or because some view conforms with one's own inclinations, or out of respect for the prestige of a teacher. But when you know for yourselves: these things are unwholesome, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the wise; these things when practiced and observed, conduce to loss and sorrow - then do ye reject them. But if at any time you know for yourselves: These things are wholesome, these things are praised by the intelligent; these things, when practiced and observed, conduce to welfare and happiness, then Kālāmas, do ye, having practiced them, abide.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the accent in this message was on realizing for oneself for the sake of one's welfare. Such realization comes through the practice of Dhamma and realizing by experience, through deep introspection through the technique of the practice of morality (*Sīla*), mastery over the mind (*Samādhi*) and insight (*Paññā*), which the Buddha revealed at the Deer Park at Saranath when he delivered his first Sermon known as *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta*.<sup>8</sup>

Turning the Wheel of the Dhamma, the Buddha taught that seekers of truth must avoid two extremes – that of the path of sensual pleasure, and that of extreme penance or austerity. By avoiding the two extremes one follows the Middle Path, the path of Moderation. In order to observe moderation, it is necessary to have strength on the one side, and thoughtfulness on the other. So, we find in the formula of the Eight-fold Path that Right Concentration is well supported by the two principles of Right Effort and Right Mindfulness. Of these, Right effort promotes the ability to rise in one who is prone to sink into sensual pleasure; while Right Mindfulness becomes a safeguard against falling into extremes of asceticism.

Right Concentration is not possible without that moral purity which rids one of impure deeds, words and thoughts, and therefore, it presupposes Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood. These are the three principles of *Sīla* or moral purity, which is necessarily the preparatory ground to meditation. The training in

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7. *Kālāma Sutta*, *Anguttara Nikaya Pali*, Vol. I, p 174-179, Nalanda edition, 1960.

8. *Samyutta Nikaya Pali*, Vol. V, p 420, Pali Test Society edition.

these principles is the most fundamental aspect of Buddhism and forms the vital factor in contemplative life. Hence, first of all, one must train oneself in moral purity in accordance with the rules of the Middle Path, in order to attain full and immediate results of meditation in an ascending scale of progress. One who conforms oneself to these ideals will acquire self-confidence, inward purity, absence of external fear, and thereby, mental serenity, factors which are imperative for ultimate success in meditation.

The remaining two principles of the Middle Path, Right Understanding and Right Intention, form the next important stage, the acquisition of Paññā or full knowledge, which must be attained by moral purity and concentration.

Thus, the scheme of Dhamma training consists of the three sections: *Sīla*, *Samādhi* and *Paññā*; and it is referred to in the Tipitaka as the Three-fold Training, “*Tividha Sikkhā*.”

These three divisions in their most highly developed form constitute the Noble Eight-fold Path, the interrelation of which is discussed in the *Culla-vedalla Sutta*<sup>9</sup>. The three principles, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood comprise *Sīla*; Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration *Samādhi*; and Right Understanding and Right Intention is *Paññā*. The practical aspect of Dhamma is the practice of *Vipassanā* Meditation clearly revealed by the Buddha in the *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*.<sup>10</sup> In this discourse the Buddha clearly indicates that how the practice of Mindfulness with insight helps in the eradication of craving and desire, which is the major cause of conflict and suffering.

Before I conclude let me now discuss about the practical aspect of the *Dhamma* which is the practice of *Vipassana* Meditation and how it helps in dealing with the contemporary Social issues, arising of the negative impulses which comes because of reactions and conflicts. *Vipassana* is a Pali term and has a distinct meaning. Etymologically it is derived from the verb *passa*<sup>11</sup> (in skt. *paśya*)

9. *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, p. 369, Nalanda edition.

10. *Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, 22nd discourse of Dīgha Nikāya, Nalanda edition.

11. *Vipassati* which means ‘to see clearly’, ‘to obtain spiritual insight’, Pali – English Dictionary by Rhys Davids, 627.

to see with 'Vi' prefix, which means *visesena* with special manner or *vividhena* with different angles, or *vicayena* by disintegrating it. Thus, in Pali literature we do find expressions as:

Paññattim ṭhapetvā visesena passatīti vipassanā.<sup>12</sup>

Vipassana is observation of reality in a special way, in the correct way by disintegrating the apparent truth. Thus, Vipassana means to see things as it is and not as it appears. Vipassana is best rendered in English as insight. Paññā, full wisdom, full knowledge and 'yathābhūta nānadassana'<sup>13</sup> - knowledge and vision as it is - are the terms generally used to define Vipassana. It is particularly applied to the 'full knowledge' acquired by discerning the three characteristics (*ti-lakkhana*) of the phenomenal world namely - impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*) and substance-lessness (*anattā*).

Therefore, *Vipassana* can best be rendered in English as insight, to see things as they really are, in their true perspective, in their true nature. It is in true sense a practical technique of self-examination, a scientific method of self-observation that results in the total purification of mental impurities and the realization of highest happiness of full liberation. The best advantage in the practice of *Vipassana* meditation is that one finds that even before the eradication of the ultimate suffering, one experiences many benefits. One learns how not to react to the symptoms of suffering, which include the physical and mental discomforts of mundane world amongst the human beings. These discomforts are the main source of suffering, due to the habit pattern of our mind leading to greed, hatredness and ignorance. These negative impulses create psychic and psychosomatic disorders in the present-day society, thereby, curtailing the human relations.

In today's chaotic world we find the vibrations of negativity - anger, hatred, ill-will, animosity, ego, etc., in the atmosphere around us. This pollution, although invisible, causes so much distress and is the main cause for the contemporary social issues and problems in the society. It is also the vital cause for mental tensions, stress, strain, conflicts and several types of psychosomatic disorders. This

12. Aṭṭhasālini, Dhammasaṅgani aṭṭhakathā, ii. p. 67.

13. Paṭisambhidāmagga, p. 37 Nalanda edition.

results in nothing but misery. Vipassana or the practice of Dhamma is the way out of this suffering. In true sense it is a technique to purify the mind. With a pure mind one is able to easily overcome the darkness of ignorance and negativity. It brings total 'well-being' to the person who practices it and provides a secure, happy, peaceful and harmonious living.

Nearly two centuries after the passing away of the Buddha, the Emperor Asoka practiced and propagated the Dhamma for the ethical development of his people, with remarkable success. This earned him great fame in the annals of the world. H.G. Wells, the renowned historian of modern times, pays glowing tribute to him in the following words in 'The Outline of History':

'Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousness's and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.'<sup>14</sup>

Emperor Asoka explains in one of his edicts how he could achieve amazing success while his predecessors could not. According to him, in olden times other rulers also wanted their subjects to progress by the adequate promotion of Dhamma. He himself was filled with a similar desire, and to achieve this goal he undertook various measures. He provided several types of amenities to the public, as his predecessors had, but doing this proved of no avail. Then he exhorted people to follow certain dhamma practices, so that they might develop compassion, charity, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness. For this purpose, he adopted two means: the issue of dhamma proclamations and the practice of deep introspection - *nijhati*.<sup>15</sup> It is quite possible that by the word *nijhati*, Asoka referred to the practical aspect of Dhamma as Vipassana Meditation.

The understanding of Dhamma and its practice in the form of Vipassana meditation helps in purification of mind and promote positive values amongst practitioners to take responsibility for their

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14. In the article, 'Ashoka in Ancient India' by Nayanjot Lahiri (5 August 2015). Harvard University Press. pp. 20-. ISBN 978-0-674-91525-1.

15. Pillar Edict VII of King Ashoka.

actions and see themselves as global citizens who can contribute to a more peaceful, just and sustainable world.

To conclude, we may say that there already exist the ancient guidelines for human behaviour which are found in the teachings of the religions of the world and especially in the Dhamma preached by the Buddha which are the condition for a sustainable world order and can form the basis of a Global Ethics. This truth is already known, but yet to be lived in heart and action.

The practice of Dhamma makes us understand that as a human-being we are interdependent. Each of us depends on the well-being of the whole, and so we have respect for the community of living beings, for people, animals, and the plants, and for the preservation of the earth, the air, water and the environment. We take individual responsibility for all we do. According to the law of Karma, all our decisions, actions, and failures to act have consequences.

Dhamma teaches us that we must treat others as we wish others to treat us. We make a commitment to respect life and dignity, individuality and diversity, so that every person is treated humanely, without exception. We must have patience and acceptance. We must be able to forgive, learning from the past but never allowing ourselves to be enslaved by past memories of hatredness, thereby opening our hearts to one another. We must sink our narrow differences for the cause of the world community practicing a culture of solidarity and relatedness.

Considering all of us as a global family, we must strive to be kind and generous. Dhamma teaches us not live for ourselves alone, but should also serve others, never forgetting the children, the aged, the poor, the suffering, the disabled, the lonely and the people from other cast, religion, community and countries as well. No person should ever be considered or treated as a second-class citizen, or be exploited in any way whatsoever. Our happiness lies in the happiness of others. There should be equal partnership between men and women. We must not commit any kind of sexual immorality. We must put behind us all forms of domination or abuse.

The practice of Dhamma makes our commitment towards a culture of non-violence, respect, justice and peace. Dhamma

inspires us not oppress, injure, torture, or kill other human beings, forsaking violence as a means of settling differences.

We must strive for a just social and economic order, in which everyone has an equal chance to reach full potential as a human being. We must speak and act truthfully and with compassion, dealing fairly with all, and avoiding prejudice and hatred. We must not steal. We must move beyond the dominance of greed for power, prestige, money and consumption to make a just and peaceful world.

One cannot be changed for the better unless one purifies one's mind. If each individual is changed then the entire Society will change and so the World will change. The Dhamma practice motivates us to increase our awareness by disciplining our minds, by Vipassana Meditation, by prayer, or by positive thinking. Therefore, Dhamma makes us commit ourselves to this global ethic, to understanding one another, and to socially beneficial, peace-fostering, and nature - friendly ways of life.

It is high-time that we compile all the moral values based on Dharma and classify them into different levels. The United Nations should adopt them as the Global Education in Ethics and prescribe it for study at appropriate levels from the primary to university courses in the education system of all nations and make it part of the Human Resources Development Programme.

This should constitute the Blue Print for education commencing from the 21st Century for all the Nations of the world in order to produce better individuals, lead a simple and better family life, secure a better national life, better environment ensuring happiness to Humanity as also to all living beings. This is the long range and the only solution for all the problems of the World.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Dharma The Global Ethics by Justice M. RAMA JOIS, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, 1997, pp. 94-96.

