

A BUDDHIST CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOBAL EDUCATION OF ETHICS: A NON-METAPHYSICAL BASIS FOR ETHICS

by Marasinghe Arachchige Radika Sewwandi Marasinghe*

ABSTRACT

Much emphasis is given today for education for a livelihood. In a world with close association with science and technology it is understandable that one needs to be professionally or technologically qualified in order to make one's livelihood. As a result, much emphasis is given for technical and scientific studies. In this process, naturally something very important is lost, namely, the ethical education, education on the principles of basic cultured and civilized human behavior in the society and toward the nature.

In the education system in any society it is very important that an important place is allocated for ethical education. If people do not have ethics, or a good sense of good and bad and right and wrong, such a world will not be a safe place to live. Today the world is very advanced in education. But in many societies there are so many crimes taking place daily. According to the teaching of the Buddha, the reason is education without morals. In the Silavimamsa Jataka (362) the following is said: the learnedness of one who is without virtue is of no use (silena anupetassa – sutenattho navijjati).

Today religions are very popular because of the advanced information

*. M.A. Student at Post Graduate Institute of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Kelaniya, Intern- SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

technology. They reach people all over the world by means of public media. Many religious organizations own their own television stations and they run programs day and night. Looking from that angle, we may say that we are living in a highly religious world the world fifty years ago. But this is only one side of the picture. The other side of seemingly religious world is alarming. Not only religious activities but also crimes too have become rampant. This suggests that people are not serious about religious ethics. There are reasons for this. One very important reason is that, in order to follow a religious teaching, one has to accept the doctrines of that religion. If one does not accept the doctrines of a religion one does not follow it. For example, if people are to follow ethics in theistic religions, they have to believe that God exists and that ethics comes from him. Today there are many who do not believe in God. Unfortunately, as a result, they also reject theistic religious ethics.

In my paper I will present that in Buddhism ethics (morality, virtue or *sila*) does not depend on any metaphysical beliefs about Creator God or any other such phenomena. For instance, what the Buddha teaches the ordinary people as the basic morality, the five precepts (*pañca sila*), has no specific connection with the any specifically Buddhist concepts. This *sila* can be followed by anyone whether she is a follower of Buddhism or not. I will present that Buddhism has a universally valid basis of morality. In order to support this further, I will go beyond the basic five precepts, and refer to some very important discourses of the Buddha in which he explains this broad basis. One is the *Kālāma-sutta* (*Anguttara-nikaya*) taught by the Buddha to the *Kalamas* who did not believe in any specific religious teacher. When they informed that to the Buddha, he did not find fault with them. Instead he showed them how to be good (moral or ethical) without being a member of any particular religion. He did not ask *Kalamas* to be his followers. Secondly, I will discuss the *Apaṇṇaka-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikaya* 60) in which the Buddha showed to his listeners (brahmin householders of the village named *Sālā*) the way to be moral even if they did not believe in rebirth and other similar phenomena which an ordinary person cannot know for sure.

The theme 'education for ethics' has two aspects, education and ethics. Although Buddhism has so much to say about both these matters, I will focus only on ethics, and try to show how Buddhist ethics can form an important aspect of global education of ethics. The main idea of

my paper is that, according to Buddhism, people can follow principles of ethics (morality) even if they are not affiliated with any particular religious metaphysical beliefs. By developing this idea, I will show how Buddhism can contribute to the global education of ethics. As the main source of this discussion I will use the discourses from the Sutta Pitaka of the Pali canon.

1. RATIONAL FOUNDATION OF BUDDHIST ETHICS

In many religions the basis for ethics is metaphysical. The best example for such a metaphysical basis is the belief in God as the giver of law and source of ethics. According to the main theistic religions in the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is the creator and sustainer of the world; he is omnipotent (all-powerful), omni-benevolent (all-good) and omniscient (all-knowing). These characteristics, in particular, the last two, indicate that God is the source of all goodness in the world. Based on this belief, in ethics, there is a theory which identifies God as the source of ethical rules or ethical commands (divine command theory). The ten commandments in Judaism and Christianity are an example of this type of morality. The word used here, 'commandment' indicated the nature of these morals, they are commands by God and the commands of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent and omniscient being have to be obeyed unconditionally by human beings.

If God really exists and if God has the qualities mentioned above, there is not any problem in accepting and following the commands of such a God. The problem, however, is that there is no guarantee that such a being with such qualities exist in the world. In the traditional theologies of the theistic religions there are many arguments presented to prove that God actually exists. These arguments and the controversies based on this theistic claim have been there for several thousand years. Today with the vast development in science, increasingly more and more people reject the belief in a creator God. When Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) invented the telescope and viewed the sky what he saw was totally opposite to the belief held up to that point, namely, that the Earth is the centre of the universe and that all heavenly bodies including the Sun rotates round the Earth (=geo-centric view of the universe), which was supported by Christianity. He saw that the

Earth and the other planets were rotating around the Sun (heliocentric view of the universe). This observation was considered to be a big blow to the religiously supported view. Ever since the dawn of science in the West starting from the 16th century gradually due to various scientific discoveries the belief in God gradually waned in the society. In the 19th century, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) famously said that God is dead. What he meant by that is that the relevance of God to the modern society was non-existent. The result of all these new developments was that people rejected not only the religion but also the ethics taught in religion.

A society cannot function without a system of individual and social ethics. It is important there must be a way to preserve ethics even if people do not wish to believe in metaphysical beliefs advocated by religions. Buddhism appears to provide a way to preserve ethics even in the absence of metaphysical beliefs. Buddhism started by rejecting both Brahmanism, which was based on the concept of Brahma as the creator of the world and many Sramana traditions with various metaphysical beliefs. Having rejected both these religious systems, that existed during his time, the Buddha found the middle path, which is an ethical path to attain nirvana.

It is important to see that the ethical path of the Buddha is not only for those who wished to attain nirvana. The Buddha's path is also for the ordinary people in the society who were either the strict followers of the Buddha, namely, upāsaka and upāsikā, or who were the ordinary people in the society following any other religion or not following any religion at all. It is relevant in this context to examine how the Buddha addressed these non-upāsaka and non-upāsikā groups in the society. In the discourses there are two instances, directly relevant to this discussion, where the Buddha was addressing groups of non-religious people.

2. THE DISCOURSE TO KALAMAS (KĀLĀMA-SUTTA, ANGUTTARA-NIKAYA)

This discourse is considered to be the Buddhist charter of freedom of thought. Kalamas were a free thinking group who were not committed to any particular religion or a religious teacher. When the Buddha visited them they said to the Buddha that

they were perplexed when different religious people come to them and say that only what they say is true, everything else is false. They further said to the Buddha that they did not know whose view is true and whose view is false. Then the Buddha said the following:

“It is fitting for you to be perplexed, O Kalamas, it is fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter.

Come, Kalamas, Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cogitation, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think ‘The ascetic is our teacher.’ (Translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi p.134)

The Buddha having outlined ten grounds upon which one must not accept anything said by anyone, the Buddha gives the following criterion to reject or accept what is said by someone.

But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are unwholesome; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to harm and suffering,’ then you should abandon them.

But when you know for yourselves, ‘These things are wholesome; these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to welfare and happiness,’ then you should engage in them”. (Translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005: 134-135)

In this discourse, the criterion given by the Buddha to Kalamas to judge whether some action is good or bad is one’s own understanding. Standing on one’s own understanding one needs to see:

(i) Whether the action is wholesome or unwholesome (kusala or akusala), which refers to greed, hatred and delusion as unwholesome and nongreed, nonhatred and nondelusion as wholesome

(ii) Whether the action is blamable or blameless

(iii) Whether the action praised by the wise or censured by the wise, and

(iv) Whether the action undertaken will lead to harm or to happiness.

In this account, in fact, there are two criteria: one is to one's own judgment; the other is the consequence produced by the action. From an ethical point of view, these two criteria are very important and there is much to discuss in them. But in the present context what is important to note is that these criteria have nothing to do with any metaphysical beliefs associated with any religion. These criteria can be accepted and followed by anyone in the world. To conclude the discourse, the Buddha points out Kalamas who follow this method will have four assurances whether or not they hold in any particular religious beliefs. The Buddha says:

“When, Kalamas, this noble disciple has thus made his mind free of enmity, free of ill will, uncorrupted and pure, he has won four assurances in this very life.

The first assurance he has won is this: ‘If there is another world, and if good and bad deeds bear fruit and yield results, it is possible that with the breakup of the body, after death, I shall arise in a good destination, in a heavenly world.

The second assurance he has won is this: ‘If there is no other world, and if good and bad deeds do not bear fruit and yield results, still right here, in this very life, I live happily, free of enmity and ill will.

The third assurance he has won in this: ‘Suppose evil befalls the evil-doer. Then, as I do not intend evil for anyone, how can suffering inflict me, one who does no evil deeds?’

The fourth assurance he has won is this: ‘Suppose evil does not befall the evil-doer. Then right here I see myself purified in both respects’. (Translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2005:136).

These assurances are for someone who does not believe in rebirth and life after death. Although Buddhism accepts both these beliefs, interestingly, here the Buddha is allowing room for ethical behavior even for those who do not accept such beliefs.

3. THE DISCOURSE ON THE INCONTROVERTIBLE TEACHING (APANNAKA-SUTTA, MAJJHIMA-NIKAYA 60)

This discourse was taught by the Buddha to a group of Brahmin householders at the village called Sala. At the very beginning of the

discussion, as a response to a question asked by the Buddha they acknowledge that they do not have any religious teacher agreeable to them in whom they have 'acquired faith supported by reasons.' To this non-religious group the Buddha says that they should follow the 'incontrovertible teaching' which will lead to their welfare and happiness for a long time. By this the Buddha means a way of behavior which cannot go wrong under any circumstances.

In this discourse, the Buddha refers to five views accepted and rejected by different religious groups. These are the doctrine of nihilism denying the existence of moral actions, the doctrine of non-doing denying the consequences of moral actions, the doctrine of non-causality, the belief that there are not immaterial realms (*arūpa-loka*), and the belief that there is no cessation of being. Some people accept these beliefs and some reject them. As one can see, all these beliefs are metaphysical in the sense that an ordinary person cannot know for sure whether they are true or not. What should an intelligent person do in such a situation?

The Buddha's answer is the following. The Buddha says that if one, not knowing whether any one of these beliefs is true or not, concludes that it is false, then he will behave wrongly and as a result, he will be censured by the wise in this world and if it is true, he will be born in an unhappy existence after his death. In this manner by concluding negatively he loses both this world and the next. Suppose this person, not knowing whether or not the view is true, concludes that it is true, he will act morally and as a result, in this life he will be praised by the wise and, if the belief is true, then he will be born after death in a happy existence. In this manner, by concluding positively he wins the both worlds.

The moral reasoning in this discourse is very interesting. It is based on calculation made on the basis of probability. The beliefs involved are metaphysical and beyond one's direct knowledge. The possibilities of being true or false are equal. In such a situation involving morality, the Buddha says that one should be guided by what gives maximum gains. This is common rationality and it is what any rational person (= a person promoting one's interests) will do. What is interesting here is that the moral or ethical behavior is not based on any metaphysical beliefs but based on rational thinking.

In the two discourses discussed, the consequence of actions is stressed as an important deciding factor. The Buddhist concept of consequence covers the consequences of both this world and the next. However, the next world is not a part of the immediate experience of the ordinary people. But the discourses say that a rational person may not rule out any possibility simply because one cannot or does not see it.

In addition, what is important with regard to consequences is the consequences for oneself and the other (doer of the action and the recipient of consequences). This aspect is not mentioned in the above-mentioned two discourses. But the Buddha addresses this issue in the discourse addressed to Rahula Thera (Advice to Rahula at Ambalaṭṭhika: Ambalaṭṭhika Rāhulovāda-sutta, Majjhima-nikaya 61). The Buddha says the following:

“Rahula, when you wish to do an action with the body, you should reflect upon that same bodily action thus: ‘Would this action that I wish to do with the body lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results?’ When you reflect, if you know: ‘This action that I wish to do with the body would lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action with painful consequences, with painful results, then you definitely should not do such an action with the body. But when you reflect, if you know: ‘This action that I wish to do with the body would not lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is a wholesome bodily action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results,’ then you may do such an action with the body”. (Translation from Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995: 523-524) (The same way or reflection is also applicable to the two types of verbal and mental actions.)

What is significant in this explanation by the Buddha is that it places emphasis on both the doer and the recipient of the results of the action. Furthermore, it mentions both the doer and the recipient together as the third category to be taken into consideration. This, in other words, shows that, in the Buddhist analysis, both oneself and the other should be given equal consideration.

4. UNIVERSAL BUDDHIST ETHICS: THE FIVE PRECEPTS (PAÑCA-SILA)

The five precepts prescribed by the Buddha for the lay society can be considered an example of the Buddhist ethics universally applicable without religious or any other cultural or social distinctions. These five precepts form the moral basis of the society as a whole. In Buddhism, these precepts are prescribed not only for the householders but also for the renunciants, monks and nuns (bhikkhu, bhikkhuni). For the latter, in the place of the third precept of abstaining from the wrong sexual conduct, the precept is to abstain from sex altogether. The fact that these precepts are for all in the society indicate that they have a wide application in Buddhism. However, a careful reading of the Buddhist literature would show that the five precepts were absorbed to Buddhism from the general Indian religious tradition. For instance, the Jataka stories refer to the five precepts indicating that they were pre-Buddhist. According to the Maha Dhammapala Jataka, the children of those who preserve the five precepts do not die young. This attribution of the five precepts to the society before the Buddha suggests that these precepts were a part of the overall Indian culture. We cannot find any Indian religion that did not accept the importance of these precepts although they did not specifically mention this as the five precepts. According to the teaching of the Buddha, one becomes a follower of the Buddha by taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha (sarana gamana). Once one becomes a follower of the Buddha, the ethical behavior becomes mandatory. While it is ten precepts for the monastic community with other rules, for the lay people, it has always been the five precepts.

The five precepts are abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking alcoholic drinks. These five are presented in the negative form in the precepts as they are recited by the Buddhists all over the world. However, the precepts are not negative although the formulations are presented in negative form. In Buddhism, the sila or virtue is classified as involving both negative aspect of abstaining from the evil (virati), and the positive aspect of practicing the related good aspects (samādāna). In the discourses these two aspects are described in the following words:

*“Abandoning the taking of life, the ascetic Gotama dwells refraining from taking life, without stick or sword, scrupulous, compassionate, trembling for the welfare of **all** living beings.” Thus the worldling would praise the Tathagata. “Abandoning the taking of what is not given, the ascetic Gotama dwells refraining from taking what is not given, living purely, accepting what is given, awaiting what is given, without stealing. Abandoning unchastity, the ascetic Gotama lives far from it, aloof from the village-practice of sex. Abandoning false speech, the ascetic Gotama dwells refraining from false speech a truth-speaker, one to be relied on, trustworthy, dependable, not a deceiver of the world. Abandoning malicious speech, he does not repeat there what he has heard here to the detriment of these, or repeat here what he has heard there to the detriment of those. Thus he is a reconciler of those at variance and an encourager of those at one, rejoicing in peace, loving it, delighting in it, one who speaks up for peace. Abandoning harsh speech, he refrains from it. He speaks whatever is blameless, pleasing to the ear, agreeable, reaching the heart, urbane, pleasing and attractive to the multitude. Abandoning idle chatter, he speaks at the right time, what is correct and to the point, of Dharma and discipline. He is a speaker whose words are to be treasured, seasonable, reasoned, well-defined and connected with the goal.” Thus the worldling would praise the Tathagata” (Translation from Walshe, 1995: 68-69)*

The negative effects of taking alcoholic drinks have been elaborated in the discourses such as the Sigalovada-sutta (Advice to Sigala) of the Digha-nikaya. According to this discourse, taking alcoholic drinks is an evil behavior and also one of the ways that causes loss of one's wealth. Its ill effects are listed in the following manner:

“There are these six dangers attached to addiction to strong drink and sloth-producing drugs: present waste of money, increased quarrelling, liability to sickness, loss of good name, indecent exposure of one's person, and weakening of the intellect”. (Translation from Walshe, 1995: 462)

In the discourses there are many discussions on these evils which we do not need to describe in detail. The point, however, is that these precepts can be regarded as the minimum requirements of any civilized society. This may be established with reference to all the other world religions. In Judaism and Christianity these precepts are found among the Ten Commandments said to have been given by God to Moses. In Islam these precepts are found

among the things prohibited (*haram*). In Hindu Dharma-sastra literature too these precepts are found. In this manner, we see that these precepts are universal. These rules cover the basics of civilized and cultured life anywhere in the world anytime.

There is, however, one important difference in the manner the moral rules are treated in different religions. The difference between the moral systems between the non-theist Buddhism and the theist religions is quite clear. In the theist religions, as referred to above, the moral rules are given to people as commands of God. Usually commands are to be obeyed without questioning. Furthermore, the violations of the moral rules are considered to be violations against the rule-giver, namely, God. Again, this condition could dissuade some people from observing these rules however much they are good. In the Buddhist formulations of the five precepts they are not given as commands of anyone, not even as the commands of the Buddha. Therefore, there is nothing to obey or disobey anyone. When Buddhists undertake to observe these rules what they do is they make a promise to themselves: I undertake to observe the precept of abstaining from taking life – *pānātipātā veramani sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*. If they violate their promise they have to be responsible unto themselves, not to anyone else.

This characteristic of the Buddhist approach to the most fundamental ethical rules of the lay people takes away any metaphysical affiliation to one's moral life. This approach affirms one's own responsibility and freedom in moral behavior. This, no doubt, is attractive to those who desire to follow a system of ethics while safeguarding their freedom.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What we discussed so far covers some very important discourses by the Buddha dealing with ethical or moral reasoning and the five precepts which are the most basic morality of the lay people. Usually religious ethics are closely connected with religious metaphysics. In Buddhism too, it is the same. Sila or morality in Buddhism is the first step in the path to nirvana. In the eightfold path sila constitutes a prominent place. The teaching is that one must start the path with the practice of sila and then proceed to concentration (*samadhi*)

and wisdom. This shows that sila is basically for release from the samsaric suffering. However, what we saw in the two discourses we discussed at the beginning of this paper is different.

The two discourses were addressed to two groups of people who were not the followers of the Buddha. At the village of Sala, those brahmins openly admitted that they do not have religious teacher they accepted and followed. Clearly these people are not aiming at attaining nirvana. On the part of the Buddha, he did not say to them that they should accept him as their religious teacher. In the Kalama-sutta, he clearly told them not to accept anything on personal religious authority. Nor the Buddha said to them to accept the belief in rebirth and or results of actions in the next world. Here the Buddha guided two groups of people who were not religious to begin with.

What is the significance of the message of the discourses and the five precepts discussed above for the global education of ethics? As we mentioned in the introduction, a reason for the rejection of ethics by many people in the world is their rejection of religious beliefs which they find unacceptable. Along with religion, many have thrown away ethics too. By providing a non-metaphysical and naturalist reasons for accepting ethics/morality Buddhism shows that one can be moral/ethical although one is not religious in a narrow sense. This can be a very effective way to teach ethics in an increasingly a-religious world of today.

References

- Bhikkhu Bodhi. (2005). *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon* (Boston: Wisdom Publications).
- Bhikkhu Bodhi. (1995). *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications).
- Walshe, Maurice. (1995). *The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications).
- Jayatileke, K.N. (1963). *Early Buddhist Theory of knowledge*. George Allen & unwin, London.
- Kalupahana, David. J. (1995). *Ethics in Early Buddhism*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
- Malalasekera, G.P., (1966). *Encyclopedia of Buddhism: Vol 2*, The Government Press, Sri Lanka.

