

## RELEVANCE OF THERAVADA BUDDHIST ETHICS

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**Abstract:** Buddhism has been regarded as the boldest and most fruitful experiment in spiritual realization made from time to time in India. It has tremendous influence upon the religious, philosophical, moral, and cultural spheres. The Buddha advises us to compare ourselves with others, and on this basis, not to harm others. As he says, all beings are the same in that they want to be happy, not to suffer, and in that they are afraid of death. Comparing ourselves with others, we should not harm others, as we would not want anyone to harm us. This is a teaching in which the Buddha describes a kind of “golden rule” of comparing ourselves to others.

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### Theravada Buddhist Ethics

As a rule, both the schools of Buddhism, Theravada, and Mahayana, claim that they are loyal to the teachings of the Buddha. It is noteworthy that the two schools have been flourishing by embracing large numbers of adherents till the present, while all other sects have almost ceased to exist. The epithet ‘Heenyana’ (small vehicle, less law or narrow doctrine), however, has been given to Theravada Buddhism by Mahayanees (followers of Mahayana, great, high or vast-vehicle), evidently to play it down. The Theravadins have never called themselves Hinayanees. The charge that the Theravādins always have self-centered virtues and are entirely devoid of regard for others is unfounded because the Arhats take much interest in the salvation of others. We may, however, accept that an Arthas is not so much concerned with the salvation of others as the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisatta regards others’ salvation as more urgent than his own. Another important difference between these two sects is that while Theravadins are content (concerned) only with showing the path of freedom for making, the Mahayanees hold that the enlightened person should continuously strive for the spiritual good and welfare of all men. Keeping in view this fundamental difference between these two sects, some people hold that Mahayana is influenced by foreign elements or teachings.

Theravæda is called the ‘doctrine or the elders. These elders were the immediate disciples of the Buddha. Thus, Theravada Buddhism can be regarded as more original than Mahayana. The Theravada Scriptures are recorded in Pāli, while the scriptures of the Mahayana school are mainly written in Sanskrit. So,

Theravada Buddhism became more popular as its texts were easy to comprehend. Mahayāna, however, became highly scholastic and it is not easily comprehended by common people.

As a rule, Buddhist Ethics, in general, is very emphatic in character. It has remarkable clarity. It comprehends the triad of moral codes representing physical actions, verbal actions, and mental actions. This conception is pragmatically pivoted around the threefold tenet of Buddhism; eschewing all evil, cultivating good deeds, and purifying one's mind. From the ethical point of view, Theravada Ethics is inseparable from religion (theology) in the sense that religious virtues are the roots of this ethics. Ethics here fully takes into account responsibility, free will, self-determination, and moral judgment. Theravada Ethics is concerned with conduct resulting from uncoerced choice, which has reasons and meaning but no causes.

Buddha does not believe in Being, One-Being, and becoming. He also does not believe in self-indulgence or self-mortification and recommends the ethics of moderation. He mainly expounded the doctrine of ethical means. He preached and taught that the two extremes of life-self-indulgence or pleasure and self-mortification should be avoided. The habitual devotion, to the passion, to the pleasure of the sensual things, a low and pagan way of seeking, satisfaction, ignoble, unprofitable, is fit only for the worldly-minded. Similarly, self-mortification is painful, ignoble, and unprofitable. There is a middle path discovered by the Tathāgata, a path that opens the eyes and bestows understanding, which leads to peace, to insight, to the higher wisdom, to Nirvana. This Aryan eightfold path consists of Right View, Right Aspirations, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Mode of Livelihood, Right Efforts, Right Mindfulness, and Right Rapture.

The Theravada Buddhist Ethics is the mean between self-indulgence and self-mortification. Buddha says that self-torture is fruitless. Self-torture weakens the body and instills wicked notions in mind. One cannot attain Nirvana through self-torture. It is always painful and unprofitable. Self-mortification can lead us nowhere—craving for pleasure springs from egoism. When egoism is rooted out, lust is extinguished. One, who is free from egoism and passion, may satisfy his natural appetite, but that satisfaction does not defile him.

Self-indulgence always disturbs the peace and purity of mind. But when one satisfies his hunger and thirst and keeps the body in good health, protects it from heat and cold and saves it from fatigue, covers it comfortably and decently, all these are necessary to keep the mind strong and pure. The middle path is that which avoids the two extremes. Its aim is the purity of heart and purity of conduct and equanimity, peace, and enlightenment.

When we deal with the Characteristics of Theravada Buddhist Ethics, we can say that it is autonomous. In his last preaching, Buddha told his disciples that they should depend on themselves and the truth for their own salvation or enlightenment. He closed his sermon with these words, 'and whosoever, Annada, either now and after I am dead, shall be a lamp unto themselves. And a refuge in themselves shall betake themselves to no

external refuge, but holding fast to the truth as their lamp, and holding fast as their refuge to truth shall look not for refuge to anyone besides themselves-it is they who shall reach the very important topmost height, but they must be anxious to learn.

The doctrine of Karma or moral retribution occupies a prominent place in Buddhism. This doctrine makes clearer the autonomous nature of the Theravada Buddhist morality. Buddha says about this doctrine, "There are O monks, some samanas and Brihmannas who maintain and believe that all the pleasure or pain or indifference to pleasure and pain that this person feels are the result of his acts in previous births. There are O monks, and some believe some samanas and Brahmanas who maintain and believe that these are all results of creation by the lord of the universe. And there are O monks, some who think that all these have neither reason nor cause.

But the Buddhist doctrine of Karma which has been described in the above passage, is different from the other doctrines of causation or the doctrine of Karma. In Buddhism, improvement, degeneration, ascent to heaven or descent to hell, happiness or misery, all are the results of our own deeds. We ourselves are molders of our own fate. Thus, it is clear that Buddhism emphasizes the freedom of will, and its morality is autonomous in nature. The prominent characteristic of the Theravada Buddhist Ethics is its Autonomy.

The other characteristic of Theravada Ethics is its practicability. In Buddhism. There is no sharp distinction between ethical theory and moral practice. But the theory is regarded incomplete without practice. The former always presupposes the existence of the latter. There can be no theory that is thought of merely for its own sake. The practical nature of morality can be seen conspicuously in Theravada Buddhism when its disciples flocked around the prominent personality of Buddha for the purpose of practicing Brahmacharya under his guidance. Buddha did not provide any solution to the metaphysical problems because, according to him, there is no curiosity and delay their setting about the task of extermination evil. The only aim of Buddha was to bring about the extinction of Dukkha. Thus, the preaching of Buddha is mainly practical. It did not admit any practical use to the metaphysical problems. He says, and wherefore my disciples, have I not told you that? Because my disciples, it brings you no profit, it does not conduce to progress in holiness, because it does not lead to the turning from the earthly, to the subjection of all desire, to the cessation of the transitory, to peace, to knowledge, to illumination, to Nirvana; therefore have I not declared it up to you?

Theravada Buddhist Ethics is positivistic. Following the traditional belief of his time, Buddha referred in his preaching to other worlds and beings that lived in those worlds. Its acceptance was partly a mode of popular expression which it would have been impossible to avoid for anybody using the language of the day. It is also true regarding his belief in the Karma doctrine in which eschatological reference is definitely mentioned. In his

teachings, Buddha did not expound whatever was not positively known. For example, he wholly repudiated the authority of Vedic tradition, especially as regards rituals.

The Theravada Buddhist Ethics emphasizes the purity of the inner life. External purity does not give true satisfaction. The heart must be purified. Our greed, hatred, and delusion must be destroyed for the purification of the mind. Anger, envy, jealousy also must be rooted out. It has been said that “A bad mind and wicked deeds defile a man. Killing, cutting, binding, stealing, speaking lies, fraud, deception, adultery; that is what defiles one, but not the eating of flesh. Neither penances nor humans, nor oblations, nor sacrifices, nor observances purify a mortal who has not conquered his doubt. So, Buddha always laid greater stress on the purification of the mind.

Theravada Buddhist Ethics may be described as altruistic. In fact, Nirvana is superior-good, and it is realized through universal goodwill and love. May all beings be happy and secure? Let's no one element other. Let's him/her not deride others in any place. Let's him not, out of resentment, wish harm to another. As a mother, risk of her own whole life, protects his son, her only son, so let him cultivate towards the whole world-above, below a heart of love unstinted, unmixed with different or opposing interests. Let a man maintain this mindfulness all the while he is awake, whether he is standing, walking, sitting, or lying down. It states that the heart is the best in the world. According to it, one should pervade the whole world with love, pity, sympathy and equanimity. Enjoyment, indifference, and Compassion are generated by love. So, love is the highest.

Ahimsa is the keynote of Buddhism. According to Theravada Buddhist Ethics, we should be mild in faultfinding. We should not offend anyone by action, word, or thought. One, who takes recourse to the violence, is considered not a just man. Non-injury in thought, word endurance, self-realization, and good love constitute the main principle of Theravada Buddhist ethical philosophy.

It has been said that Theravada Buddhist Ethics is intellectualistic because passions are intellectual disorders. They spring from egoism, or the false sense of individuality egoism generates thirst or will to live. Egoism is due to ignorance, and ignorance can be destroyed by the knowledge of Nobel Truths. Nirvana can be attained through virtue, intuition (Prajna), and enlightenment (bodhi). Therefore, the charge that Theravada Buddhist Ethics is intellectualistic is wrong. Purity of heart and purity of conduct is the first steps of enlightenment. Intellect, emotion, and will are only necessary as means for it. Enlightenment presupposes the sanctification of one's whole personality. Theravada Buddhist Ethics stresses universal love, benevolence, compassion, and cheerfulness.

The hereditary caste distinctions are not recognized by the Buddha. One cannot become a Brahman by birth but only by his deeds. One who is an outcast becomes a Brahman by his deeds. Thus, we see that the hereditary caste distinctions are not recognized in Theravada Buddhist Ethics. A Brahman is one who has self-

control, has subdued his desire, which is virtuous, temperate, mild, wise, and tranquil in thoughts, words, and deeds. Only such a person has cast aside the burden and attained Nirvana.

The importance of Buddhism to modern society stems from the fact that it does not attempt to resolve the question of good and wrong by linking the moral life to a set of philosophical dogmas from which moral precepts are formed or to the moral commands of a sectarian God. People who have abandoned metaphysics and religious dogma in preference to the modern scientific, materialist, and deterministic view of existence have moved towards a skeptical stance on the nature of moral values. Morality is often linked to philosophy and religion in their minds. As a result of this mindset, they have created a moral vacuum in their lives. Greed, hate, and delusion become the driving factors behind their actions in such situations.

The Buddha's teaching that everything in life changes (Anicca) and that nothing is permanent, not there is no ensure in us (Anatta), is the starting point for Buddhist precepts. Buddhist precepts are basically designed to make a man understand, what it means to live morally, or the study of the basis on which people make their decisions about moral issues. For most religious people, this begins by the understanding of the true nature of the world and how to live harmoniously and responsibly in it.

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