

**CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE BUDDHIST METHODS OF  
ARRIVING AT VALID ETHICAL JUDGMENTS**

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## CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE BUDDHIST METHODS OF ARRIVING AT VALID ETHICAL JUDGMENTS

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### **Abstract**

Ethics or moral philosophy is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending judgements from an ethical point of view on the rightness or wrongness of the conduct of a person. The main purpose of ethical philosophy is to provide the criteria or standards to determine the value and disvalue of human behavior. For this purpose, different religions and different socio-philosophical thinkers have distinctively presented their opinions to assess the nature and the function of good and bad.

Among those opinions, the Buddhist philosophical standpoint on ethical judgements is adequate and satisfactory enough to apply to the task mentioned above. In Early Buddhist Canonical scriptures, there are some notable references which illustrate the standard methods that can be used for the evaluation of ethical questions. Most importantly the *Kālāma-sutta* widely exemplifies diverse standards of moral advice which existed contemporary with the Buddha. In this *sutta*, while the Buddha is rejecting ten grounds of moral decisions which are considered to be unsatisfactory, it also points to the possibility of independent enquiry into ethical judgement. In another notable explanation found in the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda-sutta* and the *Bāhitika-sutta* ethical criteria for making ethical decisions between praiseworthy (*anavajja*) and blameworthy conduct (*sāvajja*) have been elaborated. Evidently, the said references bring sophistication not only to issue of the appropriate ethical criteria for determining the ethical status of human actions, but also the psychological foundations of ethics. The criteria used in Early Buddhist scriptures for the ethical evaluation of human conduct indicating significant ethical distinctions will be fully discussed in this article.

### **Keywords**

Ethics, Early Buddhism, Ethical Values, Mind,  
Moral Judgment

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## Buddhist Methods of Arriving at Valid Ethical Judgments

Buddhism is a doctrine formulated for wise people (*paccattam veditabbo viññūhi*), and there is no single Buddhist teaching which is incomprehensible to the wisdom of such a person. Therefore, it is possible to claim that not only the ethical teachings in Buddhism, but also the whole teaching of the Buddha has been established on an insightful, rational basis. The words “good” and “right” in the English language are frequently used to evaluate the ethical behavior of humans while the terms “bad and wrong” are used to determine the unethical modes of human conduct. Such terms may be used to refer to other human activities as well, although they may not always be used referring to an ethical standard. The aim of this article is to examine the Buddhist methods for arriving at ethical judgements on the basis of the doctrines represented in the Pali Canonical literature.

According to the Buddha’s teachings, the ability to engage in reasoning is not something unalterable. An individual has the ability either to develop that ability or to let it stagnate and deteriorate. Initially knowledge is gained through the consciousness corresponding to the objects of the five senses, material form, sound, smell, taste and touch. All these sense objects are perceived through the five sense bases which are known as, the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, and the body. The mind also plays a part in this process of sense perception. Even though one comes to a particular understanding of certain things depending upon mere knowledge acquired through the experience of the senses, that knowledge and understanding is imperfect, and such forms of knowledge are not recommended in Buddhism for a perfect and complete understanding of the world. There is a possibility of being incorrect in the knowledge or the understanding attained through sensory perception, due to some external causes such as, weakness of the sensory organs, weakness of sensory object etc. Wisdom plays a critical and cardinal role in the cognitive process in the teaching of the Buddha.

Therefore, it is evident that the mere knowledge obtained by sensory perception and the inference which is made based upon this sensory knowledge is not considered to be the only and satisfactory means of knowledge in Buddhism either for attainment of the ultimate truth or accomplishment of ethical knowledge. The knowledge gained through mere sensory perception is represented in Buddhism by the two popular terms *saññā* and *viññāṇa*.

The Buddha claims in numerous instances in his teachings that there are different degrees of a person’s knowledge and understanding, and these different levels of understanding are presented and formed by adding distinctive prefixes to the root “ñā”.

1. *Sam+ñā = saññā = sañjānati* (Recognizes)
2. *Vi+ñā = viññāṇa = vijānāti* (knows at the sensory level)
3. *Abhi+ñā = abhiññā = abhijānāti* (knows in a higher way)
4. *Pari+ñā = pariññā = parijānāti* (knows comprehensively)

Among these, *saññā* and *viññāṇa* are not sufficient means of knowledge for arriving at ultimate truth. Buddhism recognizes higher forms of knowledge called *abhiññā*,

*pariññā*, and *paññā*. Thus, a person has to go through several stages of enlightenment in order to have a perfect understanding of something. Buddhism also offers a gradual method of acquiring perfect understanding:

1. *Sutamaya paññā* (wisdom through listening)
2. *Cintāmayā paññā* (wisdom through concentration)
3. *Bhāvanāmayā paññā* (wisdom through cultivation)

The recommended process of attaining supreme knowledge in Buddhism also consists of three stages. They are,

1. *Samjānana* (the stage of recognizing/ perceiving)
2. *Vijānana* (the stage of intelligence)
3. *Parijānana* (the stage of complete understanding)

Here, the second and the third stages are more vital in the process of either understanding the ultimate good or accomplishing perfect ethical knowledge. An individual has to make use of this insight or wisdom in his or her behavior. It is based on these higher modes of knowing that Buddhism engages in ethical reasoning.

Buddhism has defended the notions of ethical truth, as well as ethical knowledge. In some other schools of ethical philosophy, what is found is that there are ethical theories according to which one can know what kind of ethical values people follow or have followed at different times and places, but there is no sense in which one can have objective and real knowledge of what is good and bad. For them good and bad differ from community to community and from individual to individual; there is nothing called universal knowledge or truth in the sphere of ethics.

But according to Buddhism, good and bad are universal phenomena which can be evaluated depending on some rational foundations. For example, if one says that all living being should not be killed, what is said is true, not because it is the opinion of that person but because it is an ethical truth. Early canonical teachings provide a set of universally applicable ethical principles in several discourses to determine goodness and badness or rightness and wrongness of an action. As pointed out by the esteemed Professor P.D. Premasiri in his writings<sup>1</sup>, the most prominent discourses in this regard are, *Kālāma-sutta*, *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda-sutta*, and *Bāhitika-sutta*.

Prof. P. D. Premasiri has pointed out that the most prominent discourses revealing the proper way of making valid ethical judgments are the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda-sutta* and the *Bāhitika-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*. According to the accounts given by him, the discussion which, has taken place between King Pasenadi Kosala and Ven. Ānanda in the *Bāhitika-sutta*, evidently refers to the rational basis of Buddhist ethics. The king started the discussion by raising a question relating to rational enquiry concerning the good and bad behavior of a person. The question was, "Might the Buddha engage in the sort of behavior by way of body, speech, or mind that is faulted by ascetics and Brahmins?"<sup>2</sup> Answering this question, Ven. Ānanda affirmed that the Buddha does not engage in such sort of behavior by body, speech or mind that is censured by ascetics, Brahmins and the wise (*viññū*). The king expressed his delight for giving a satisfactory answer to his question. There the king says that he did not

appreciate the praise or blame of others when it was expressed by incompetent fools, without due examination or proper scrutiny but he appreciated praise or blame of others when expressed by competent and intelligent people after due examination and scrutiny.<sup>3</sup>

This explanation points out that an ethical judgement made by foolish people without a careful consideration is not viewed as a correct ethical judgement. Therefore, one has to insightfully and rationally examine a particular action in order to determine the ethical value of it. The significance of rational thinking in making ethical judgement is emphasized in the above statement attributed to the king.

Moreover, the king raises the question as to what kind of bodily, verbal, and mental behavior is faulted (*opārambha*) by sensible ascetics and brahmins. Ven. Ānanda's answer is that it is unwholesome (*akusala*) behavior. The king pushes the question further asking what kind of behavior is unwholesome (*akusala*). The answer to this is that it is blameworthy behavior (*sāvajja*). Then the king wants to know what kind of behavior is blameworthy. The response to this was that it is behavior which is hurtful (*savyābajjha*). The king pressed the question further asking what kind of behavior is considered to be hurtful. The response to this was that it is behavior that produces suffering or a painful consequence (*dukkhavipāka*). Ānanda further elaborates his response by showing that behavior which produces a suffering consequence is bodily, verbal, or mental action leading to hurting oneself (*attabyābādhāya*), hurting others and hurting both.

On the other hand, what is praised by sensible ascetics and brahmins (*anopārambho*), is wholesome (*kusalo*), praiseworthy (*anavajjo*), not involving harm (*abyābajjho*), and resulting in happiness (*sukhavipāko*). The key terms used in this discourse denote the rational grounds for making ethical evaluations. Additionally, although an individual has no moral conscience to directly determine what is good and bad, it is possible to understand the consequences of an action. Therefore, this criterion recommended in the discourse can evidently be recognized as a proper means of arriving at moral judgements.

As pointed out by Prof. P. D. Premasiri, a quite similar discussion is also found in the *Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda-sutta*. It consists of further clarification on the uniqueness of the Buddhist idea of a rational foundation for ethics. At the beginning of the discourse the Buddha recommends the importance of insightful reflection before performing any physical, verbal or mental action. This continuous reflection is compared to looking at one's image in a mirror. Ven. Rāhula was advised to perform physical, verbal, and mental action only after continuous reflection.<sup>4</sup> According to the instruction given to Ven. Rāhula by the Buddha it is only after continuous reflection that one can get to know whether a particular physical, verbal or mental behavior is harmful to oneself, others or both oneself and others, and whether that act leads to suffering. The Buddha points out that it is such action that one ought not to do (*sasakkaṃ na karaṇīyaṃ*). As stated in the *sutta*:

When you want to act with the body, speech, and mind you should check on that same deed: 'Does this act that I want to do lead to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both? Is it unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result?' If,

while checking in this way, you know: 'This act that I want to do leads to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both. It is unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result.' To the best of your ability, Rāhula, you should not do such a deed. But if, while checking in this way, you know: 'This act that I want to do doesn't lead to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both. It is skillful, with happiness as its outcome and result' then, Rāhula, you should do such a deed.<sup>5</sup>

According to the account given in the *Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda-sutta* the Buddha uses the terms *kusala* and *akusala* which have a direct connection with ethical usage. The Buddha also advises Ven. Rāhula to train himself to purify his bodily, verbal, and mental action by repeatedly reflecting on the consequences that can be produced by the action that he is going to perform. For this reason, it is possible to say that Buddhist ethical principles take a kind of consequentialist approach, meaning the ethical evaluation of any action is directly related to a skillful assessment of its consequences.

Another noteworthy source of the principles of Buddhist ethics is the discourse in relation to the discussion of the Buddha with the people of Kālāma village. That discourse is popularly known as the *Kālāma-sutta*, one of the most important teachings of the Buddha with regard to the Buddhist view on acceptable criteria for evaluating the moral behavior of a person. This sutta opens with the request to the Buddha to counsel the Kālāmas on the confusion caused by the various pieces of moral advice given by different religious teachers who visited the village called *Kesaputta*. As the people explain,

Bhante, there are some ascetics and brahmins who come to *Kesaputta*. They explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, denigrate, deride, and denounce the doctrines of others. But then some other ascetics and brahmins come to *Kesaputta*, and they too explain and elucidate their own doctrines, but disparage, denigrate, deride, and denounce the doctrines of others. We are perplexed and in doubt, Bhante, as to which of these good ascetics speak truth and which speak falsehood.<sup>6</sup>

The complaint made by Kālāmas on this occasion is entirely relevant to the moral question. They were perplexed by those different approaches on how to arrive at ethical knowledge and were unable to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. The Buddha begins his admonition by justifying the worthiness of rational enquiry of the Kālāmas on these diverse moral standpoints saying, "It is fitting for you to be perplexed, Kālāmas, fitting for you to be in doubt. Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter."<sup>7</sup> Providing a precious article to the Encyclopedia of Buddhism under the title of ethics, Prof. P. D. Premasiri comments on the excellence of this point as follows:

The Buddha answered that their doubts were justified under such circumstances and went on to give an autonomous criterion of morality which he taught would help them to leave aside authoritarian moral codes and determine, in accordance with their own reason, what is really right or wrong.<sup>8</sup>

When the Kālāmas request the Buddha to indicate the proper standards for determining what is right and what is wrong and what should be accepted and what should be denied, the answer given by the Buddha is utterly rational and more

relevant to the point about acceptable grounds for the evaluation of action. In addition to that, as commented by Prof. Premasiri, the answer given by the Buddha presents an autonomous criterion for moral judgement. The Buddha says that;

One should know by himself that these things are unwholesome (*akusala*), these things are blameworthy (*sāvajja*), these things are censured by the wise (*viññūgarahita*), and if that action also leads to harm (*ahitāya*) and suffering (*dukkhāya*), then you should abandon them.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, the Buddha mentions ten grounds on which ethical judgements should not be made. They are,

1. Do not go by oral tradition
2. Do not go by lineage of teaching
3. Do not go by hearsay
4. Do not go by a collection of scriptures
5. Do not go by logical reasoning
6. Do not go by inferential reasoning
7. Do not go by reasoned cogitation
8. Do not go by the acceptance of a view after pondering over it
9. Do not go by the seeming competence of a speaker
10. Do not go by respect for the teacher, thinking: ‘the ascetic is our guru’

The Buddha didn’t reject the ten points but considered them as unsatisfactory criteria to determine what is good and bad in an ethical sense. In addition to that an action arising from three unwholesome roots viz. greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) is not to be performed as such action is blamable, censured by the wise and brings bad karmic consequences. On the other hand, actions arising from the three wholesome roots non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion do not entail the breaking of the basic moral precepts nor does it encourage others to do so. As such, these actions are not blamable, are personally and socially beneficial, praised by the wise, and bring about good karmic fruits.

It is clear that the discussion in the *Kālāma-sutta* is closely connected to the rational foundation of ethics in the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddha advises the Kālāmas not to depend on any kind of authoritative moral criteria, but to make autonomous moral decisions based on reasoning. According to the account the issue to be determined is what is *kusala* or *anavajja*. Any action that can be ethically characterized by using those terms should conform to the following requirements:

1. It should be praised by the wise (*viññūpasatthā*)
2. It should lead to welfare (*hitāya*) and happiness (*sukhāya*)

Among these criteria, the terms “*hita*” and “*sukha*” or welfare and happiness are viewed as the results of an action and for this reason, the ethical teaching in Buddhism involves to some extent an approach similar to that of the consequentialists in Western ethical theory. The ethical standards taught in this discourse conform to the view that scientifically observable facts are relevant to an ethical judgment. Accordingly, what is caused by three unwholesome roots, is blamable; such action is criticized by the wise; such action brings suffering as its

consequences. On the other hand, an action motivated by three wholesome roots, is not unwholesome and blameworthy; such action is praised by the wise; such action produces welfare and happiness. The above account reflects the soundness of the Buddhist ethical teaching.

The ethical approach in the teachings of the Buddha takes into account the importance of free-will (*attakāra*), and moral responsibility as a requirement for the ethical evaluation of actions. It is an obvious fact that Buddhism has recognized an entirely autonomous ground for arriving at moral decisions. It is due to this reason that an individual can be said to be responsible for his or her own action. This idea is often emphasized in the Dhammapada, “By oneself is evil done and by oneself is one sullied. By oneself is evil not done and by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. One does not purify another”<sup>10</sup>

In connection with this activity, it is important to examine here what the Buddhist point of view is in dealing with ethical propositions and what form of criteria are recommended in Buddhism to determine good and bad. It is also necessary to consider here, whether the Buddhist standpoint on ethical evaluation takes an objective, or a subjective, relativistic, skeptic or a realistic position and if not, whether the Buddhist standards are different from all other ethical modes. One has to carefully examine the early canonical teachings in order to reach a comprehensive understanding on the ethical standards proposed in early Buddhist teachings. Such an examination is likely to lead to the understanding that the Buddha’s enquiry into ethical propositions is distinctive when compared with the above ethical approaches. Some aspects of similarity with previously mentioned normative standards may also be seen.

### **Other Prominent Buddhist Ethical Teachings**

Buddhism recognizes the ethical significance only of volitionally performed actions. The very first verse in the Dhammapada for instance, exemplifies the involvement of mind as the most powerful and the cardinal matter of all kind of activities done by body, speech and mind.<sup>11</sup> A similar position is taken in the *Upāli-sutta* in which the Buddha affirms that mental action is the most crucial in the performance of good and evil actions.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, one might not be able to comprehend the exact nature of an action through a mere surface observation of a particular action. There could be a situation in which one might cut another with a knife with a pure mind. But the intention or the volition in such situations is not visible to others. Others may judge that as a bad or evil action just making a surface observation. In this kind of situation, one needs to understand the intention which causes a person to perform that action in order to make a valid judgement. The ethical nature of an action is thus directly related to the volition or intention of an action.

Buddhism also affirms three kinds of wholesome roots (*kusalamūla*) and three forms of unwholesome roots (*akusalamūla*). One has to be aware of them when performing bodily, verbal, or mental actions. The action caused by three wholesome roots such as, non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*) is considered right or good conduct while the action rooted in three unwholesome roots; greed



(*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) is said to be wrong or bad conduct. It is recommended on another occasion with regard to these wholesome and unwholesome roots that, one has to reflect on the root causes of action, on the action and the consequences of action before performing an action, while performing an action and after performing an action.<sup>13</sup> An action is supposed to be done only after knowing the goodness or the badness of the action through repeated reflection.

In addition to that, Buddhism does not reject the inherent nature of humans when considering the ethical norms applicable to them. It is important to note here that the Buddha was well-aware of the common interests of all sentient beings and he uttered that all beings long for happiness (*sukhakāmā*) and are averse to pain (*dukkhapaṭikkulā*). The Buddha also proposed a set of general ethical rules classified under wholesome acts (*kusalakamma*) which are rooted in wholesome roots. Buddhism approves of finding happiness through actions based on wholesome roots but, is not in favor of committing any actions to gain (temporary) happiness in any way that is rooted in unwholesome traits. Therefore, the awareness of volition or the intention of an action is a requisite factor in dealing with evaluation of human actions. According to the ethical criteria in the teachings of the Buddha, intention or volition is one of the factors in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action. Buddhism also acknowledges that the intention or volition alone is not a valid criterion to appraise the nature of that action. Apart from the intention, the nature of the action, the way it is performed, the consequences of the action, and how it would affect others, must be taken into account.

Another notable criterion on which some philosophers propose to make ethical evaluations is the notion of ultimate good. One very well-known notion of ultimate good is “happiness”. If happiness is considered to be the ultimate good, any action that conduces to the maximization of happiness can be considered good. According to the teleological point of view, what is intrinsically bad is unhappiness and if an action conduces to the production of unhappiness, that action can be considered bad. This ethical standard is identified with the utilitarian ethical approach.

The next Buddhist ethical criterion to be discussed seems to fit somewhat with this utilitarian idea of the ultimate good. It is obvious that, depending on the extent to which a person’s action is relevant to the pursuit of ultimate good, the goodness or the rightness of an action is to be determined. In Buddhism, the ultimate good for every person is the attainment of *nibbāna*, which is considered to be the ultimate bliss (*paramasukha*), moral perfection, supreme enlightenment, ultimate liberation and complete mental well-being. This is not merely **one** person’s experience but a common goal for all human beings.

The right action or the good action to do, therefore, is the action which is instrumental in bringing about the ultimate good of one and all human beings. For happiness is conceived as the ultimate good, the right or the good action which, when performed, is that which tends to promote the happiness of oneself and others. Nevertheless, happiness alone is not the only characteristic of the moral perfection recommended in the ethical teachings of Buddhism. The nibbanic experience and the other characteristics of the ultimate goal are proclaimed by the Buddha on another

occasion in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya* in the following terms: “This is peaceful; this is sublime that is, the stilling of all activities, the letting go of all attachments, the ending of craving, fading away, cessation, and extinction.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the quality of the happiness which is experienced in the fully liberated state (*nibbāna*), is not a conventional kind of happiness as defined by utilitarian philosophers. Buddhism points out different degrees of happiness which can mainly be divided into two forms. One is sensory (*vedayita*) and the other one is non-sensory (*avedayita*). The second type of happiness is considered to be the highest happiness when compared to the ordinary sensory happiness. The sensory happiness is viewed as a lower degree of happiness, for it is impermanent. The non-sensory happiness is attained only after eradicating all the defilements in the mind whereas sensory happiness is attained without destroying the defilements. As long as the defilements, including the various hindrances are not destroyed, whatever happiness may be attained is subject to change.

The happiness attained in the state of moral perfection is considered to be non-sensory (*avedayita*) happiness which is the highest happiness (*paramasukha*). The discussion of this point occurs in the *Āṅguttara-nikāya*. It shows the uniqueness and the universality of the experience of Buddhist moral perfection. Venerable Sāriputta says, as mentioned in one of his teachings: “This *nibbana* is happiness.” And one of the monks who heard this asked: “Friend Sāriputta, what is then here the happiness that is not sensed?” Answering this question Sāriputta said that: “That very fact of being not-sensed is happiness here.”<sup>15</sup>

Some critics of Buddhism argue that the Buddhist view of this moral perfection leads to a selfish attitude. But it is clear that they have arrived at such a view due to a misconception and limited understanding of the altruistic characteristics of the experience of *nibbāna*. Buddhism does not support the idea that one who has not achieved one’s own liberation can help another to attain liberation. It is only possible for one who has attained one’s own liberation. In particular, Buddhism does not accept that one can benefit people without self-realization. In the Dhammapada verses 158 and 159 for instance, this idea occurs as;

One should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only should one instruct others. Thus, the wise man will not be reproached.<sup>16</sup>

One should do what one teaches others to do; if one would train others, one should be well controlled oneself. Difficult, indeed, is self-control.<sup>17</sup>

According to K. N. Jayatilleke’s explanation, it is reasonable to view that the moral perfection recommended in Buddhism is neither ethical egoism nor ethical altruism, but ethical universalism.<sup>18</sup>

As a doctrine that values individual abilities, Buddhist teachings recognize the individual’s freedom of thinking and responsibility for one’s own action. Therefore, it is a fact that the Buddhist ethical teachings approve of the autonomous right of a person to evaluate one’s own action, and for this purpose, Buddhism suggests ethical standards focusing on the process of individual verification. Having depended on this position, another method of determining whether an action is right or wrong is

presented in Buddhism taking into consideration the psychological factor called conscience involving the comparison of the feelings of one's own with those of others (*attūpamā*). On one occasion the Buddha said that "There is no privacy in the world for someone who commits a bad deed. One will know for oneself whether one has done it openly or secretly."<sup>19</sup> This form of ethical criterion is shown in different instances in the Pali Canon and the *Anumāna-sutta* for instance, gives a noteworthy description in this regard.

That person who is of evil desires and who is in the thrall of evil desires, that person is displeasing and disagreeable to me; and, similarly, if I were of evil desires and in the thrall of evil desires, I would be displeasing and disagreeable to others.' When a monk, your reverences, knows this, he should make up his mind that: 'I will not be of evil desires nor in the thrall of evil desires.'<sup>20</sup>

This ethical criterion is similar to the ethical rule known as the Golden Rule principle introduced in western ethics and is highly valued in Buddhism. This criterion is well-exemplified through the explanations given in various places in the canonical discourses. A well-known example is given in this connection in four main verses of the Dhammapada:

All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.<sup>21</sup>

All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.<sup>22</sup>

One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter.<sup>23</sup>

Buddhism presents this criterion of "compared to oneself" (*attūpamā*) from a very profound and practical sense in order to make universally valid ethical evaluations, and the next instance mentioned in *Potaliya-sutta* would extend the weight of the above criterion further by adding more evaluative methods. The sutta mentions that,

If I were to kill living beings, I would blame myself for doing so; the wise, having investigated, would censure me for doing so; and on the dissolution of the body, after death, because of killing living beings an unhappy destination would be expected.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the individual's conscience (*attā pi maṃ upavadeyya*), two other standards viz. the disapproval of wise people (*anuvicca viññū garaheyyum*) and the bad consequences that cause one to be born in state of downfall (*parammaraṇā duggati pāṭikaṅkhā*), are taken into consideration as the method of determining good and bad.

Additionally, in determining the worth of human action in terms of consequences, the third point: the bad consequences that cause a person to be born in a state of downfall (*parammaraṇā duggati pāṭikaṅkhā*) has a direct connection with the Western consequentialist view point, although the western view may not grant the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. Buddhism also particularly points out the importance of consequence of action in order for making valid ethical judgements and the doctrines of *kamma* and rebecoming (*punabbhava*) play prominent roles in this connection. The

concept of *karma* taught in Buddhism which, is a philosophical extension of volitional action itself, is entirely related to human behavior. And rebecoming (*punabbhava*) is the productive result of *karmic* consequence. Pointing out the relevance of the concepts of *karma* and rebecoming to moral philosophy, Prof. Premasiri writes that there is a great recognition of the concept of *karma* in Buddhism like the recognition given to God in theistic religion, and people are supposed to behave morally due to the belief in rebecoming.

Like the recognition in theistic religions of a world order created and governed by a supreme God, Buddhism has the recognition of an order of sentient existence governed by the law of *kamma*. This is a Buddhist affirmation about the nature of reality. We have seen that Buddhism gives foremost importance to consequences of behavior in making moral distinctions. Belief in the process of rebecoming (*punabbhava*) is considered in Buddhism to be important to motivate people to behave morally.<sup>25</sup>

According to the explanation given by Prof. K. N. Jayatilleke, two out of four major factors of ethical significances in Buddhist ethics are connected to the doctrines of *kamma* and the process of rebecoming.

The ethics of Buddhism would be significant only if certain facts are true, viz. (1) there is freedom or free will in the sense enunciated, (2) there is human survival or the continuity of individuality, (3) this continuity is such that the avoidance of evil and the cultivation of the good along with the purification of mind tends to make our nature better and our condition happier, while the opposite course of action has the reverse effect, and (4) there is a state, when the mind is pure and cleansed of all defilements a state of bliss, perfection, realization and ultimate freedom.<sup>26</sup>

The notion of *karma* which, determines the destiny of a person, is also a crucial matter which covers the psychological part of ethics. The essence of the Buddha's illustration of the concept of *kamma* is to transmit the idea that one is responsible for one's karmic consequences derived from one's own behavior. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Buddhist analysis of the karmic process comprehends the psychological involvement of one's behavior rather than the physical involvement. At this point, the elaboration given in the *Kukkuravatika-sutta* shows the weight and the effectiveness of psychological engagement in performing any kind of action.

Here, Puṇṇa, someone develops the canine practice completely and constantly, he develops the canine habits completely and constantly, he develops the canine mentality completely and constantly, he develops the canine behaviour completely and constantly. Having developed the canine practice completely and constantly, having developed the canine habits completely and constantly, having developed the canine mentality completely and constantly, having developed the canine behaviour completely and constantly, he, on the breaking up of the body after dying, arises in companionship with dogs.<sup>27</sup>

This law of *kamma* in Buddhism is a self-governing and self-verifiable process by which one can design one's own destiny. In other words, a person is responsible for his own destiny. On the other hand, life after death is not something designed by an extra force. It is also a result of generative cause of karmic action. Therefore, it is

reasonable to affirm that, it is possible to value or devalue not only in the ethical sphere, but also other spheres in the entire life process on the basis of this *karma* concept in Buddhism.

## Conclusion

Through all of the above moral principles, Buddhism seeks to emphasize that human behavior and moral judgments should be made on a valid, rational, psychological, sociological and, humanitarian basis. Buddhism highly values ethical behavior and ethical judgments established on the basis of rational thinking. It also maintains that it is not proper to attribute ethical praise or blame to a person without proper investigation and valid reasons (*ananuvicca अपariyogāhetvā*). The point of the above discussion was to show clearly that there are universalistic characteristics in the Buddhist teachings for making valid ethical judgments.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Premasiri 1990

<sup>2</sup> “*Kiṃ nu kho, bhante, ānanda, so bhagavā tathārūpaṃ kāyasamācāraṃ, vacīsamācāraṃ, manosamācāraṃ samācareyya, yvāssa kāyasamācāro opārambho samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi*”<sup>ti</sup>?  
MN II: pp. 113 -114

<sup>3</sup> “*Ye te, bhante, bālā abyattā ananuviccā अपariyogāhetvā pasesaṃ vaṇṇaṃ vā avaṇṇaṃ vā bhāsanti, na mayaṃ taṃ sārato paccāgacchāma; ye pana te, bhante, paṇḍitā viyattā medhāvino anuvicca pariyogāhetā pasesaṃ vaṇṇaṃ vā avaṇṇaṃ vā bhāsati, mayaṃ taṃ sārato paccāgacchāma.*”  
*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> “*Paccavekkhitvā paccavekkhitvā kāyena kammaṃ kātappaṃ*”  
MN I: p. 414

<sup>5</sup> “*Rāhula, kāyena kammaṃ kattukāmo ahoṣi, tadeva te kāyakammaṃ paccavekkhitappaṃ: ‘yannu kho ahaṃ idaṃ kāyena kammaṃ kattukāmo idaṃ me kāyakammaṃ attabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, parabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, ubhayabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya; akusalaṃ idaṃ kāyakammaṃ dukkhudrayaṃ dukkhavipākaṃ’<sup>ti</sup>? Sace tvaṃ, Rāhula, paccavekkhamāno evaṃ jāneyyāsi: ‘yaṃ kho ahaṃ idaṃ kāyena kammaṃ kattukāmo idaṃ me kāyakammaṃ attabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, parabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, ubhayabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya akusalaṃ idaṃ kāyakammaṃ dukkhudrayaṃ dukkhavipākaṃ’<sup>ti</sup>, evarūpaṃ te, Rāhula, kāyena kammaṃ sasakkaṃ na karaṇīyaṃ. Sace tvaṃ, Rāhula, paccavekkhamāno evaṃ jāneyyāsi: ‘yaṃ kho ahaṃ idaṃ kāyena kammaṃ kattukāmo idaṃ me kāyakammaṃ nevaattabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, na parabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya, na ubhayabyābādhāyapi saṃvatteyya; kusalaṃ idaṃ kāyakammaṃ sukkudrayaṃ sukhavipākaṃ’<sup>ti</sup>, evarūpaṃ te, Rāhula, kāyena kammaṃ karaṇīyaṃ.*”  
*Ibid.*: p. 416

<sup>6</sup> “*Santi, bhante, eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā kesaputtaṃ āgacchanti. Te sakaṃyeva vādaṃ dīpenti jotenti, parappavādaṃ pana khamṣenti vambhenti paribhavanti omakkiṃ karonti. Aparepi, bhante, eke samaṇabrāhmaṇā kesamuttaṃ āgacchanti. Tepi sakaṃyeva vādaṃ dīpenti jotenti, parappavādaṃ pana khamṣenti vambhenti paribhavanti omakkiṃ karonti. Tesam no, bhante, amhākaṃ hoteva kaṅkhā hoti vicikicchā: ‘ko su nāma imesaṃ bhavataṃ samaṇabrāhmaṇānaṃ saccaṃ āha, ko musā’<sup>ti</sup>?*  
AN I: p. 188

- <sup>7</sup> “*Alañhi vo, kālāmā, kaṅkhituṃ alaṃ vicikicchituṃ. Kaṅkhanīyeva pana vo ṭhāne vicikicchā uppannā*”  
Ibid: p. 189
- <sup>8</sup> Pemasiri 1990: p. 155
- <sup>9</sup> “*Yadā tumhe, kālāmā, attanāva jāneyyātha: ‘ime dhammā akusalā, ime dhammā sāvajjā, ime dhammā viññugarahitā, ime dhammā samattā samādinna ahitāya dukkhāya saṃvattanti’ti, atha tumhe, kālāmā, pajaheyyātha*”  
AN I: p. 189
- <sup>10</sup> “*Attanāva kataṃ pāpaṃ, attanā saṃkilissati, attanāva akataṃ pāpaṃ, attanā va visujjhati, suddhi asuddhi paccattaṃ, nāñño aññaṃ visodhaye*”  
Dhp. 157: p. 58
- <sup>11</sup> “*Manopubbaṅgamā dhammā, manoseṭṭhā manomayā, manasā ce pasannena bhāsati vā karoti vā, tato naṃ dukkhamanveti, cakkamaṃ vaḥato padaṃ.*”  
Ibid. 1: p. 2
- <sup>12</sup> “*Imesaṃ kho ahaṃ, tapassi, tiṇṇaṃ kammānaṃ evaṃ paṭivibhattānaṃ evaṃ | paṭivisiṭṭhānaṃ manokammaṃ mahāsāvajjatarāṃ paññapemi.*”  
MN I: p. 373
- <sup>13</sup> MN I: p. 414
- <sup>14</sup> “*Etaṃ santaṃ etaṃ paṇītaṃ, yadidaṃ sabbasaṅkhārasamatho sabbūpadhipaṭinissaggo taṇhākkhayo virago nirodho nibbāna’nti.*”  
AN V: p. 353
- <sup>15</sup> “*Sukhamidaṃ āvuso, nibbānaṃ. Kiṃ panetthāvuso sārīputta, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitanti? Etadeva khvettha, sukhaṃ yadettha natthi vedayitaṃ*”  
AN IX: p. 34
- <sup>16</sup> “*Attānameva paṭhamaṃ, patirūpe nivesaye, athaññaṃ anusāseyya, na Kilisseyya paṇḍito.*”  
Dhp. 158: p. 56
- <sup>17</sup> “*Attānañ ce tathā kayirā, yathaññaṃ anusāsati, sudanto vata dametha, attā hi kira duddamo.*”  
Ibid. 159: p. 56
- <sup>18</sup> Jayatilleke 1984: p. 6
- <sup>19</sup> “*Natthi loke raho nāma, pāpakammaṃ pakubbato; Attā te purisa jānāti, āvī vā yadi vā raho.*”  
AN I: p. 149
- <sup>20</sup> “*Yo khvāyaṃ puggalo pāpiccho, pāpikānaṃ icchānaṃ vasaṃ gato, ayaṃ me puggalo appiyo amanāpo; ahañceva kho panassaṃ pāpiccho pāpikānaṃ icchānaṃ vasaṃ gato, ahampāssaṃ paresaṃ appiyo amanāpo’ti. Evaṃ jānantenāvuso, bhikkhunā ‘na pāpiccho bhavissāmi, na pāpikānaṃ icchānaṃ vasaṃ gato’ti cittaṃ uppādetabbaṃ.*”  
MN I: p. 98
- <sup>21</sup> “*Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbe bhāyanti maccuno, attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye.*”  
Dhp. 129: p. 46
- <sup>22</sup> “*Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbesaṃ jīvitaṃ piyaṃ, attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye.*”  
Ibid. 130: p. 46
- <sup>23</sup> “*sukhakāmāni bhūtāni, yo daṇḍena vihiṃsatī, attano sukhamesāno, pecca so na labhate sukhaṃ.*”  
Ibid. 131: p. 46
- <sup>24</sup> “*Ahañceva kho pana pāṇātipātī assaṃ, attāpi maṃ upavadeyya*”

*pāṇātipātāpaccayā, anuviccāpi maṃ viññū garaheyyuṃ pāṇātipātāpaccayā, kāyassa bhedā paraṃmaraṇā duggati pāṭikaṅkhā pāṇātipātāpaccayā.”*

MN I: p. 363

<sup>25</sup> Pemasiri 1990: p. 156

<sup>26</sup> Jayatilleke 1984: p. 6

<sup>27</sup> *“Idha, puṇṇa, ekacco kukkuravatam bhāveti paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkurasīlam bhāveti paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkurācittam bhāveti paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkurākappam bhāveti paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam. So kukkuravatam bhāvetvā paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkurasīlam bhāvetvā paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkuracittam bhāvetvā paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam, kukkurākappam bhāvetvā paripuṇṇam abbokiṇṇam kāyassa bhedā paraṃ maraṇā kukkurānam saḥabyatam uppajjati.”*

MN I: p. 388

## Abbreviations

AN *Āṅguttara-nikāya*

Dhp. *Dhammapada*

Ed. Edition

Ibid. Ibīdem (In the Same Source)

MN *Majjhima-nikāya*

p. Page

pp. Pages

Vol. Volume

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