

Thinking of Foundations and Justification of Buddhist Ethics¹

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Introduction

Studies in Buddhist ethics is growing in popularity among Buddhist scholars. A survey in more recent literature shows some new trends in the field. Traditionally studies in Buddhist ethics has been focused on the Pāli canon. An early instance of using the term ‘ethics’ in relation to the Pāli canon is the translation of *Dhammasaṅgaṇī* in 1900 by Mrs C.A.F. Rhys Davids into English as *A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*. Among those who pioneered studies in Buddhist ethics as a full fledged subject are scholars such as S. Tachibana, O.H de A. Wijesekera, K.N. Jayatilleke, and H. Saddhātissa. While Tachibana and Saddhātissa were more interested in developing the basic principles and categories of Buddhist ethics, the other two scholars, in particular, Jayatilleke,

¹ A keynote speech delivered at the IABU Conference on Buddhism and Ethics at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University Main Campus, Wang Noi, Ayutthaya, Thailand in September 2008.

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was interested in clarifying the meta-ethical issues. More recently D.J. Kalupahana, Winston L. King and P.D. Premasiri have continued with the *Pāli* tradition as their focus. G.S.P. Misra, Gunapala Dharmasiri, Dameon Keown, Peter Harvey, Charles Prebish, Mark Tatz and several others have gone beyond the limits of *Theravāda* tradition and incorporated *Mahāyāna* Buddhist ethics and have tried to see the field as a comprehensive whole. Moving somewhat away from the descriptive approach to the subject, these scholars during the last two decades have combined their meta-ethical interests with normative approaches to social, political and bio-ethical issues.

Although reviewing this rich store of literature is a rewarding exercise I am not proposing to do that here. What I would be looking at is some specific issues connected to the foundations of Buddhist ethics and the nature of justification of ethics in Buddhism. The two areas themselves are not totally new for almost all scholars who have dealt with Buddhist ethics also have discussed the basic assumptions and philosophical bases of it. In spite of such efforts by scholars still there are some issues needing more reflection. For example, the relation between *puñña/kusala* on the one hand and *sīla* on the other seem to require more sharply defined. With the *sīla* itself there is lack of clarity regarding the nature of monastic *sīla* and lay *sīla*. The paper begins with some exercise in conceptual clarification and will be concluded with some observations on foundations and justification of Buddhist ethics.

Buddhist Ethics or Buddhism as Ethics?

A primary matter to be clarified is a problem connected to determining the proper location of ethics in the field of Buddhist studies. In western philosophy ethics is one area of study studied on its own, as an independent and dissociated subject. Discussions on Buddhist ethics as a separate area of study are clearly owing to this adherence to western philosophical categories. Consequent studies in ethics in Buddhism too appear to be done as a separate subject. While such a study within limits may be justifiable this fragmentary approach can pose difficulties in understanding the overall nature of the teaching of the Buddha. There is a wealth of material in the teaching of the Buddha dealing with what we consider today meta-ethical issues. It would, however, be a serious misrepresentation



if we consider Buddhism solely as a meta-ethical system. The primary emphasis of the teaching is the practice. The analysis is there only in so far it facilitates practice. Once we place the whole soteriological enterprise of the Buddha in its proper context this matter becomes clear.

The fundamental problematique, which the Buddha set upon finding a solution for was human suffering understood in a very deep sense. In a traditional *Theravāda* story we are told that the Prince Siddhartha saw an old man, a sick man and deceased body in three consecutive trips to his pleasure garden before he finally saw a religious person which suggested to him the way out of the human suffering he witnessed in its very concrete form. A more philosophical representation of what he witnessed is described in the following words by the Buddha:

Bhikkhus, before my enlightenment, while I was still a bodhisattva, not yet fully enlightened, it occurred to me: Alas, this world has fallen into trouble, in that it is born, ages, and dies, it passes away and is reborn, yet it does not understand the escape from this suffering [headed by] ageing and death. When now will an escape be discerned from this suffering [headed by] ageing and death?³

It is by seeing this deep rooted suffering that Prince Siddhartha decided to search for a solution for it. An understanding of human situation as characterized by unsatisfactoriness is behind this soteriological quest.

In the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the Buddha describes the purpose of his renunciation of worldly life as “*kim kusalagavesī anuttaram santivarapadām pariyesamāno*” (“in search of what is wholesome, seeking the supreme state of sublime peace”)⁴. The emphasis is on what is wholesome and what is peaceful as goals. The term ‘*kusala*’ as we will see in the subsequent discussion is a key term in the teaching of the Buddha. It is given as both a means and an end. “The supreme state of sublime peace” referred to here articulates the ultimate goal in value-laden terms. The life in *kusala* is prescribed as leading to the highest state of peace

³ Samyutta-nikāya (tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi 2000 p.601).

⁴ Majjhima-nikāya I p.163.

which is better known as *nirvana*, or the termination of suffering. This *nirvana*-orientedness of the entire teaching is often highlighted by the Buddha in the following words: Bhikkhus, before and even now I teach only suffering and its cessation.⁵ Furthermore, the entire teaching has been described as having only one taste, namely the taste of liberation (*vimutti-rasa*), which is the cessation of suffering. The following statement occurring in the *Dhammapada* (183) is meant to capture the essence of the teaching of the Buddha:

Not doing any *pāpa*, practice of *kusala*, and purification of one's mind –this is the message of the Buddhas.

All three aspects of behaviour mentioned here are the domain of ethics. They constitute the normative ethics taught in Buddhism. The meta-ethical discussions available in the discourses are to elucidate the theoretical issues involving normative ethics. Simple elucidations and descriptions of ethics constitute a significant segment of the discourses of the Buddha. This explains why it is not altogether right to discuss ethics as standing out on its own independently of the system. In fact the entire system can more accurately be described as a system of ethics.

Understanding key concepts

With this broad context in mind we may now turn to what is usually being discussed as Buddhist ethics. Two key concepts *pāpa* or evil (deeds) and *kusala* or wholesome deeds were referred to in the *Dhammapada* stanza quoted above. The pair of *puñña* (*punya*: Sanskrit) and *pāpa* are pre-Buddhist concepts that basically refer to religious activities believed to produce good results in the life after death. These ideas have been absorbed to Buddhism, and lay people, in particular, were encouraged to abstain from *pāpa* and engage in 'meritorious' activities, and such behaviour was expected to make the *samsaric* journey smooth. The concept of *kusala* and its opposite *akusala* do not seem to have been known before the Buddha. The concepts of *kusala* and *akusala* seem to be the unique contribution of Buddhism to the ethical discourse. What is meant by the concept is wholesome behaviour which is devoid of attachment, aversion and delusion (*lobha/rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*). The distinction between

⁵ Samyutta-nikāya IV p.384; Majjhima-nikāya, I. p.140.



the two sets of concepts, *puñña/pāpa* and *kusala/akusala* has been comprehensively studied initially by P.D. Premasiri (1976 and 1990) and subsequently by scholars like Damien Kweon (1992), and hence I am not going to discuss this matter in detail here except for making a few comments. What may have been clearly defined at the early stage of Buddhism seems to have got intermingled subsequently. Gradually the distinction seems to have got blurred. Consequently the two pairs of concepts were sometimes used interchangeably. Initially at least while *puñña/pāpa* seems to have represented the *samsaric* dimension *kusala/akusala* may have represented the *nirvanic* dimension. Initially there seems to have been a clear distinction between *sīla* and *puñña*. Subsequently however the former was included within the latter as the second aspect along with *dāna* and *bhāvana* in ‘three meritorious deeds’. The significance of this inclusion is that *sīla* was primarily seen as a kind of *puñña-kamma* (meritorious act).

The three-fold meritorious action in the *Theravāda* tradition includes *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvana*. When *sīla* was included within *puñña* the emphasis is on observing *sīla* as a means of acquiring merits. It is the same with *bhāvana*. Both these aspects were originally meant to constitute the ‘three trainings’ (*tisso sikkhā*), namely, *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. The last two are to be achieved by means of *bhāvana* which is divided into two as *samatha-bhāvana* (calm-meditation) and *vipassanā-bhāvana* (insight-meditation) producing respectively *samādhi* (serenity) and *paññā* (understanding). Under the *puñña* category, however, both *sīla* and *bhāvana* were taken out of their original soteriological context and were made *puñña*-generating activities which have direct relevance for one’s *samsaric* existence. The much discussed distinction of *kammatic* and *nirvanic* Buddhism, I believe, is not irrelevant. At least in the early form of Buddhism the practice characterized by the three meritorious deeds was meant for the householders whose main function was to provide the *sāṅgha* with requisites (*dāna*).⁶ Their *sīla* constituted in addition to the five basic precepts, observing higher *sīla* on *uposatha* days. *Bhāvana* for them also seems to have meant something done occasionally. In the *Kandaraka-sutta* (*Majjhima-nikāya* 51) we have Pessa’s evidence

⁶ In the later Buddhist tradition we have inscriptive evidence of monks at times serving as dayakas.

that they too were engaged in higher religious activities from time to time (*kālena kālam...*). Thus practicing *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvana* as *puñña* was basically meant for the householders. The opposite category of *pāpa* too was applicable for the laity. Technically this cannot have been applicable to monks and nuns who were supposed to be away from *pāpa* behaviour by the very nature of their life. According to the *Singālovada-sutta* (Dīgha-nikāya 31), it was one of the functions of the religious people to keep laity away from *pāpa* (*pāpa nivārenti*).

Sikkhā is a broad term which includes the entire process of training in the Path leading to *nirvana*. In the concept of ‘*tisso sikkhā*’ we know that all three aspects of the Path, *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* are included, thus allowing a very broad spectrum for the concept. In the discourses, *sikkhā* has been given as synonymous with *kiriyā* and *paṭipadā* (*anupubba-sikkhā*, *anupubba-kiriyā*, *anupubba-paṭipadā...*⁷), terms indicative of ways of behaviour and action. The term ‘*sikkhā-pada*’ refers to the specific articles of behaviour understood as rules regulating the ethical behaviour. The five precepts (*pañca-sīla*) of the lay people and the rules of *Patimokkha* are examples for *sikkhā-padas*. Thus *sīla* is subsumed under *sikkhā* and understood as specific ways of physical and verbal behaviour characterized by abstinence from evil acts and practice of virtues.⁸

The *sīla* as the basis or the beginning point of the Path refers primarily to the behaviour that is conducive for the final goal. It is the basic rationality that one behaves in such a way that it would promote his final goal and will not be detrimental to it. In this sense we can talk about validity of *sīla* without referring much its ethical value. What I am talking here is very similar to the validity we know in the context of an argument. We say that an argument is valid only insofar as it follows logical rules and the conclusion is derived from its premises. In the same manner we can talk about the validity of *sīla* if it is conducive for attainment of the final goal and the nature of the final goal may be deduced from the overall character of the *sīla*. We know that a logically valid argument does not necessarily mean that it is also a sound argument. The soundness of an argument

⁷ Aṅguttara-nikāya IV p.201.

⁸ An excellent discussion of *sīla*, *sikkhā* and *sikkhā-pada* is available in J.D. Dhirasekera (1982) which unfortunately does not seem to have got its due attention.



depends on extra logical factors, and if the premises are true the conclusion drawn too has to be true and we take such an argument to be sound. The truth value of a premiss is a very complex issue involving theories of truth and the very definition of what it means to be true. Those who hold that ethical statements are mere expressions of emotions of the speaker (emotivists) would not even grant meaningfulness to such statements, let along truth-value. Although there may be an emotive element in ethical statements, the type of hard-core emotivism being not fashionable any longer, we need not worry about it. Nevertheless, the question still remains: are there any true grounds for ethical statements? When we examine, for instance, statements of the nature “it is good/bad...”, or “thou shalt not...” or “I undertake to observe...” it is obvious that inquiring about their truth-value is out of place. Nevertheless, we need some kind of justification for these statements. Is this justification with reference to some true state of affairs? Or is the justification coming only from some internal consistency of the system? What I mean here is coherence of a particular statement with the totality of statements within the system. But the problem is that coherence does not say much about a state of affairs as truly existing out there. The *sīla* appears to be in need of some objective basis for its justification. We will come to this issue toward the end of this discussion.

Going back to *sīla* as the basis of the Path (in *tisso sikkhā*) what is meant by *sīla* in this context is what has been described as *cūlla-sīla*, *majjhima-sīla* and *mahā-sīla* (minor, medium and great morality) in the key discourses such as *Brahmajāla*, *Samaññaphala* etc. of the Dīgha-nikāya and many other discourses. The focus of this *sīla* is the monastic life. In the context of the monastic life the *sīla* has been organized into the four divisions known as ‘the four purificatory virtue’ (*catu-pārisuddhi-sīla*). The four kinds of *sīla* included under this category are: i. *Sīla* of restraining according to the *Patimokkha* rules (*pātimokkha-saṃvara-sīla*); ii. *Sīla* of restraining faculties (*indriya-saṃvara-sīla*); iii. *Sīla* of purification of livelihood (*ājīva pārisuddhi-sīla*); and iv. *Sīla* associated with acquisition and use of requisites (*paccaya-sannissita-sīla*). The first contains the basic set of rules to be observed by a fully-admitted (*upasampanna*) monk or a nun, 220 for the former and 304 for the latter (excluding 7 *adhikarana-samathas*). This provides the basic

system of rules (*abhi-samācarika-sīla*) to be observed, starting from the most serious category of defeats (*pārājika*) to *sekhiyas* involving minor matters of behaviour. Violation of these rules involves punishment. The rest of the three *sīlas* do not have rules the violation of which involves punishment in the organizational or legal sense, but are directly related to the proper way of living a goal-oriented monastic life.

Why should one follow these rules or observe this *sīla*? The answer is provided in the discourses. For example, the story of *Ratthapāla* (occurring in the *Ratthapāla-sutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya*), says that when the young and rich householder listened to the Buddha's teaching highlighting that life is characterized by suffering caused by craving for pleasures and that one must get rid of this craving in order to achieve a life of happiness and freedom from suffering he becomes convinced; and decides that in order to realize this goal the monastic life is the most conducive. This is how he becomes a *bhikkhu* who by the very act of becoming a *bhikkhu* is committed to observing the *sīla* discussed above. The question one can raise on this *sīla* is whether or not this particular behaviour is consistent with the goal of freedom from suffering through freedom from craving, or whether or not it leads to such a goal?. If the answer is 'yes' then it is rational for one to adopt a way of life characterized by the fourfold *sīla* mentioned above. The criterion against which one has to test this *sīla* is the ultimate goal.

By analyzing the content of the *Pātimokkha-samvara-sīla* this point may be made clearer. The most serious category of violations called 'defeat' comprises sexual intercourse, killing a human being, stealing, and pretending nonexistent spiritual attainments. Of these four rules we can understand without much reflection why killing a human being has been counted among the most serious violations. Causing death is the most serious offence one can commit against another human being for the point of life is nothing other than living itself. To deprive a fellow human being of this basic possession is surely abominable. Stealing too can be understood in a manner similar to the above. But what about having sex? How can it be such a serious offence as causing loss of one's membership with the *Saṅgha* (the community of monks/nuns)? If we look at the act of having sex



from a neutral point of view we can see that there is nothing right or wrong about it. Only how one does it could make it socially acceptable or not or a crime or otherwise. In the Buddhist monastic discipline the sexual act has been taken as one of the most serious offences. The seriousness has been determined with reference to its stake on the final goal. When getting rid of all the desires is a crucial aspect of the means of achieving the goal one can understand why sexual behaviour forms one of the most serious offences. The rule has to be understood with reference to consistency to and coherence with the path.

It is useful to examine the relationship between violation of a monastic *vinaya* rule and *pāpa/akusala*. Of the four *pārājikas*, killing any living being which forms the first of the physical *pāpa* acts is clearly a *pāpa*. Killing a human being is both a *pāpa* and a *vinaya* violation of the highest degree. Killing anyone other than a human being is a lesser *vinaya* offence for a fully admitted monk. Stealing and pretending which is a form of lying too are *pāpa*. The case with the first *pārājika* is different. Although having sex is an offence of the highest degree it has not been described as a *pāpa*. Having violated the first rule if a monk or a nun were to continue to pretend to be a monk or a nun they can be guilty of *pāpa* behaviours of different sort. But having committed the first *pārājika* if the particular person were to vacate the *Saṅgha* he is only guilty of being weak and inefficient but he is not guilty of committing a *pāpa*. One could say that although having sex is not a *pāpa* it could be an *akusala* for any act done with *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha* is *akusala*. While this is true we have also to remember that almost all forms of behaviour of ordinary unenlightened people come under this category.

The tradition, however, makes a distinction between *lobha* and *abhijjhā* and *dosa* and *vyāpāda*. What is considered to be *pāpa* is acts motivated by *abhijjhā* and *vyāpāda*, severe forms of *lobha* and *dosa*. Having *lobha* and *dosa* accompanied by *moha* is considered to be the ordinary human nature. The samsaric behaviour in general is taken as motivated by these three factors. Although they are *akusala* in the broad sense the ordinary life driven by these characteristics is not considered a life of *pāpa* although as a whole such a life is samsaric and not nirvanic; and does not lead to *nirvana*. In other words,

all *akusala* is not *pāpa* although all *pāpa* invariably qualifies to be *akusala* for both categories are driven by *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. A *puñña* act performed with desire to be born in a divine abode is one basically driven by *lobha* and *moha*, and hence it cannot be a *kusala*. On the other hand, although driven by *lobha* and *moha* the act itself requires even temporarily a state devoid of *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*, thus making the particular act to be qualified as a *kusala* act. *Vipassanā* meditation is a candidate for a *kusala* act which is not a *puñña* in the sense of being relevant to samsaric existence. With this admixture of both *kusala* and *akusala* elements a *puñña* act at best is a mixed act. Thus we are led to conclude that although all *kusala* acts are not *puñña* acts all *puñña* acts have an element of *kusala* in them.

Going back to our discussion on the *vinaya* rules we can see that certain offences considered most severe are not really *pāpa*. Such rules need to be understood only within the soteriological goal of the monastic life. In this context it is useful to introduce a broad distinction available in the *Theravāda* tradition. According to this distinction offences or forms of wrong behaviour are classified as wrong by their very nature (*pakati-vajja*) and wrong because the Buddha has established so (*panñatti-vajja*). The first category of behaviour is also called '*loka-vajja*' or behaviour so considered in the world. Under the first category acts such as killing, stealing etc. are included. It is under the second category that most of the monastic *vinaya* offences come. Discussing this distinction in the context of ten precepts (*dasa-sīla*) (usually observed by *sāmaneras*), the commentary to the *Khuddaka-pātha* describes the first five as 'arisen from definite *akusalal* thoughts' (*ekanta-akusalacitta-samutthānattā...*), and thereby allow us to have some idea as to why certain forms of behaviour were considered 'wrong by nature'. Killing, stealing etc. are treated under this category for they originate from *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*. The last five of the ten precepts such as using high and valuable seats, taking meals at improper time etc have been described as *panñatti-vajja* for they are considered wrong because the Buddha has established them as so.⁹ Discussing this division in connection with *vinaya* rules the same commentator calls them '*loka-vajja*' and says that it is these rules that the Buddha meant when he said that his disciples would

⁹ The *Khuddaka-pātha* (PTS) p.24.



not violate them even if they were to lose their life. Then he refers to rules involving sharing the same bed by two monks, and building monasteries etc., calls them *paññatti-vajja* and indicates that the violation of such rules is less serious¹⁰. In the *Samantapasādikā*, the commentary to the *vinaya-pitaka*, Budhaghosa describes the *loka-vajja* offences as ‘harmful’ (*antarāyika*) for both heaven and nibbāna, and *paññatti-vajja* violation as not harmful in either manner (*anantarāyika* = *na+anatarāyika*)¹¹.

The above commentarial analysis in general goes along the line of *pāpa* and *akusala* discussed above. There is, however, some difference. In the above-analysis the *Khuddaka-pātha* commentator seems to include sexual behaviour and taking intoxicating liquor among the *pakati-vajja* offences. Even if we set aside the dubious case of taking liquor the inclusion of sexual behaviour (not sexual *mis*behaviour as in the case of the usual five precepts –*pañca-sīla*- meant for lay people) within this category is problematic. If this is correct then layman’s life amounts to something ‘definitely motivated by *akusala*’. This goes against the social values articulated by the Buddha in clear terms in discourses such as *Singalovada*. Therefore I tend to differ from the commentator in maintaining that sexual behaviour, involving violation of a defeat, should be included among the *paññatti-vajja* and not among *pakati-vajja*. (The commentator in fact does not specify the kind of *vajja* involved in the first *pārājika*.) Violation of such rules is not considered as *pāpa* per se. But they could amount to *pāpa* depending on one’s subsequent attitude and behaviour toward them. But the *pakati* (*loka*)- *vajja* offences are considered to be *pāpa* without any doubt. The most familiar classification of such behaviour outside monastic *vinaya* is the ‘ten *akusala* acts’ comprising killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, telling lies, engaging in malicious gossip, harsh words, and empty talk, severe craving, severe anger and wrong views.

The distinction between *pakati* (*loka*)-*vajja* and *paññatti-vajja* offences looks similar to the distinction we make between morality as virtuous conduct and ethics as specified conduct. The concept of

¹⁰ Ibid. p.190.

¹¹ *Samantapasādikā* , Vol.VII. p.1319.

professional ethics has been there in many societies for a long time¹². Certain ‘do’s and ‘don’t’s count only insofar as one is within a certain professional group. Once he is out of that profession one is not bound by such ethics. This concept of professional ethics is quite similar to the concept of *pannatti-vajja* as discussed above. A good number of *vinaya* rules come within the purview of ethics simply because they have been prescribed by the Buddha for those who enter the *saṅgha*. When one makes the choice to enter the Organization one becomes bound by these rules. They make sense basically within the system, not barring the fact that some of these rules may become valid even in more general social contexts too. Thus the *pannatti-vajja* aspect of the *vianya* can be described as monastic ‘professional’ ethics.

The other category, namely, *pakati (loka)-vajja*, is considered as valid in general, thus providing an example for universally valid moral behaviour.

Foundations of Buddhist ethics

If we think along the lines of *pakati (loka)-vajja* and *pannatti-vajja*, we can see that the latter classification finds its meaning and significance within the Buddhist monasticism. The specific mode of conduct exemplified by *pannatti-vajja* category is conducive to the *nirvanic* goal. Once one justifies the desirability of the goal, the relevant behaviour insofar it is consistent with the goal, does not require any further justification. What one needs to justify is the goal. Once it is done only matter to be settled about behaviour is whether or not it is consistent with the goal. But there are some preliminary matters to be settled. For instance, in order to accept the Buddhist soteriology one has to be convinced that the world/reality is such that to adopt this way of life is the most rational thing to do. How does one get convinced of this—is it simply a matter of accepting what the Buddha says, or does it require anything further?

It is clear that one needs to have accepted certain basic propositions for him to opt for following the Buddha. For example if one is not convinced about the basic unsatisfactory character of human existence, or in other words, if one does not see the point of

¹² The *Kurudhamma-jātaka* (# 275) refers to a prostitute who won the praise of others for her keenness on observing ethics of her profession despite the fact the moral status of the profession itself was questionable.



the first two noble truths, namely, suffering and how it arises, one is not likely to become a follower of the Buddha. This has to be seen by oneself and it cannot be forced on anyone. Except for a very small number of people who entered the *sangha* at a very early age of their life or for some exceptional cases such as Nanda who could not say ‘no’ to the Buddha, all the others can be reasonably judged to have entered the *sangha* preceded by this understanding. However, once they became the followers of the Buddha it seems that at least some of them had a tendency to develop a mentality of dependence on the Buddha characterizing unconditional willingness to accept what he said. For instance, the following occurs in a number of suttas: when the Buddha inquires from his disciples on certain matter they would respond to him with these words:

Venerable Sir, we have the Fortunate One as the root of the dhammas, (we are) to be guided by the Fortunate One, we have the Fortunate One as the refuge; therefore let the Fortunate One himself comprehend this; having listened from the Fortunate One the bhikkhus will learn ¹³.

The instances of this nature betray a mentality of total dependence on the Buddha. But, on the other hand, as the *Kīṭāgiri-sutta* of the Majjhima-nikāya reveals, the following attitude, namely, “The Fortunate One is the guide, and I am the follower; the Fortunate One knows and I don’t¹⁴” marks a salutary stage which has to be passed on the way to realization. Based on this one can still claim that this dependence is only for providing guidance for the Path and not for the basic conviction that *samsārā* is suffering and that one must follow the Path in order to overcome this suffering.

In the well-known *Kālāma-sutta*, the Buddha advises *Kālāmas* who were some sort of skeptics, to not accept anything unless they are convinced that it is morally good, or that what is said does not generate *lobha*, *dosa* or *moha*. But the *Kālāmas* were clearly not an immediate group of disciples. The *Vīmamsaka-sutta* of the Majjhima-nikāya (47) provides us with a different example. In

¹³ *Bhagavammūlakā no bhante dhammā bhagavamnettikā, bhagavampatisaranā. Sadhu vata bhante bhagavantaññeva paṭibhātu etassa bhāsitassa attho. Bhagavato sutvā bhikkhū dhāressantīti.*
Ānguttara-nikāya IV p. 158

¹⁴ *Satthā bhagavā, sāvako 'ham smi; jānāti bhagavā, nāham janāmi.* *Majjhima-nikāya* I p.480.

this sutta which was addressed to his immediate monastic disciples the Buddha says that anyone who cannot read other's mind¹⁵ must investigate the Buddha to make sure whether or not the Buddha is fully enlightened. In the like manner the Cūlahaṭṭipadopama-sutta of the Majjhima-nikāya (27) emphasizes that one must not rest assured till one has direct personal experience on what one tries to establish. These instances should show that acceptance of the Path and the resultant goal is not a matter of course. Such understanding/conviction has to be based on evidence. However, once one is convinced about the Path and the goal that provides sufficient basis and justification for accepting and following the *vinaya* rules relevant to *paññatti-vajja*.

The concept of *pakati-vajja* seems to pose some interesting questions regarding the overall nature of Buddhist ethics. If some act is wrong by its very nature, or if some behaviour is 'intrinsically' wrong then one does not need any extra justification to accept it as so. The term *pakati*, the Sanskrit form of which is 'prakṛti', is well known in Indian philosophy, and in the Samkya system, means the fundamental universal reality from which 'purusha' or individual *atma* originates. Although the commentator uses this metaphysically laden term he gives a psychological interpretation to it. As we saw in the above discussion why certain offences were called *pakati-vajja* is because they originate from unmistakable *akusala* (*ekanta-akusala-samuṭṭhānā*). This connection of *pakati* to familiar *akusala-mūla* makes it unnecessary for us to go into search for metaphysical nuances of it.

The very term '*loka-vajja*' highlights the fact that what is considered as immoral or unethical is what is accepted to be so in the world, i.e. in the society in general. This weight put on the world/society poses the problem of relativity of ethics versus some kind of absolute set of ethics. If the criterion of good and bad is the world or the society this effectively means that it is the people in a particular society, their history and their tradition and conventions that serves as the foundation of ethics. Societies differ in their ways of thinking and 'world making', thus making a case for multiplicity of ethics in

¹⁵ I translate "parassa cetopariyam ajānantena" (M I 318) as "anyone who cannot read other's mind" which contradicts the usual translation as referring to one who *can* read other's mind. Although the long 'a' in 'aajanantena' does not support my translation the opposite is not supported by the context.



which it is quite possible that there are two mutually contradictory systems of ethics simultaneously at two different places. But then the use of such a strong term as ‘*pakati-vajja*’ seems to indicate quite the opposite. The commentators do not seem to have analysed these usages thoroughly. It seems that they held a view to the effect that what is wrong by its very nature is so accepted by the world, and hence their equation of the two terms *pakati* and *loka*.

The division of *pakati* and *pannatti-vajja*, nevertheless, is a useful one. It is also useful in understanding the Buddha’s attitude to his own *vinaya* rules. Was the Buddha uncompromising about his own *vinaya* rules? The *vinaya* literature makes it very clear that the Buddha was not hesitant to change and modify certain *vinaya* rules depending on the context. But rules revised by the Buddha exclusively belong to the category of *pannatti-vajja*. Even in this category it is clear that he did not make modifications in what was considered to be the most serious. All the currently available *Vinaya* traditions belonging to eight different schools testify to the fact that the four *pārājikas* and thirteen *saṅghādisesas* remain unchanged¹⁶. This, to all probability, is valid across all the Buddhist traditions, known and unknown. But the fact that some rules were revised is significant. It is recorded in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* (of the *Dīgha-nikāya*) that the Buddha on his death-bed gave permission to the *saṅgha* to change minor rules. This suggests that the Master was not absolutist regarding the proper monastic behaviour. But when we examine the actual instances of revision made by the Buddha for the *vinaya* rules what we really see is that he was concerned about the practicality of what he prescribed. When what is related to *pannatti-vajja* does not involve any *akusala* per se what the Buddha had to consider was the issues of practicality. When he found, for instance, that not wearing foot-ware was not convenient in remote areas he was not hesitant to revise the rule barring wearing foot-ware. To present this as an issue of relativism versus absolutism is to misconstrue it. The real issue was whether any rule was practical or not. It is relevant in this context to remember that the Buddha

¹⁶ Mahīśāsaka, Mahāsaṅghika, Dharmaguptika, Sarvastivada, Mulasarvastivada, Kashayapiya, Sammitiya, and Theravada-all these traditions are one in having 4 *pārājikas* and 13 *saṅghādisesas* for the bhikkhus.

while appreciating *sīla* rejected irrational adherence to such rules and practices (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*). What we need to keep in mind is that these modifications were done with regard to *paññatti-vajja* offences and not with regard to *pakati (loka)-vajja* offences.

It is clear that the *vinaya* rules involving latter kind of offences that amount to *pāpa* have been treated differently: there was no bargaining on the basis of practicality. Coming out from the context of *vinaya* rules and positioning ourselves on the larger territory of morality with *puñña-pāpa* dimension we see the same attitude of the Buddha. *Pakati-vajja* originating from *akusala-mūla* has to be wrong under any circumstance.

Now *pakati-vajja* is based on the familiar psychological explanation which is quite well known. Looking at the Buddhist ethics as a broad system, not merely as a set of *vinaya* rules, we need to inquire whether there is any broader ‘universal’ basis for its ethics assumed in the teaching of the Buddha. A prominent candidate for such a basis is *viññu-purisa*. When determining what is good and bad the Buddha very often put considerable weight on ‘[the view of] wise people’ – *viññu purisa*. The well-known *Mettā-sutta* says that one should not do even a small thing censured by the wise (*na ca khuddam samācare kiñci yena viññu pare upvadeyyum*). Acts are judged on whether they are censured (*viññu-garahita*) or praised (*viññu-pasattha*) by the wise. His teaching is to be understood by such people individually (*paccattam veditabbo viññuhi*). *Viññu* seems to refer to knowledgeable, intelligent and wise people noted for their integrity among their fellow members of society. On who *viññu* is K.N. Jayatilleke says the following:

The *viññu* represented for the Buddha the impartial critic at the level of intelligent common sense and the Buddha and his disciples sometimes introduce the ‘*viññu puriso*’ or the hypothetical rational critic when it seems necessary to make an impartial and intelligent assessment of relative worth of conflicting theories (v. [see] M I 430ff., 515ff.¹⁷)

But at the same time it is clear that there is no exact objective criterion to determine whether or not one is counted as *viññu-purisa*.

¹⁷ Jayatilleke (1963/2004) pp.229-230.



There can also be differences of opinion among different *viññu-purisas*. In particular when we think of various religious teachers lived during the time of the Buddha and also about the presence of various *sramana* and *brahmaṇa* groups with divergent views determining who the *viññu-purisa* could have been a pretty complex issue. Nevertheless the fact that *viññu purisa* is referred to often as the basis of determining right and wrong conduct suggests that there was a general consensus among the learned and the intelligent during the time of the Buddha on social morality in spite of their ideological differences.

The reference to *viññu-purisa* mentioned above is certainly not given as the sole criterion. Since application and utility of morality assumes a society of people, the Buddhist morality seems to derive its justification mainly from certain fundamental commonalities shared by all living beings, not merely human beings. These commonalities are established based on certain considerations which are empirical in character. For example, the first precept in the *pañca-sīla*, namely, refraining from killing, is justified on the love all beings have for their life. This universal nature is described in the *Dhammapada* in the following manner:

*Sabbe tasanti dandassa sabbe bhāyanti maccuno
 Attānam upamam katvā na haneyya na ghātaye
 Sabbe tasanti dandassa sabbesam jīvitam piyam
 Attānam upamam katvā na haneyya na ghātaye*
 (Dhammapada 129-130)

“All fear punishment; all fear death. Comparing with oneself, one should neither harm nor kill.

All fear punishment; life is dear to all. Comparing with oneself, one should neither harm nor kill.”

The first couplets of the two stanzas articulate the premise, namely the self-protective tendency all beings have for their life. The conclusion we derive from this premises is that we should neither harm nor kill any being. The same argument has been presented by the Buddha in commenting on a conversation King *Kosala* had with his queen, *Mallikā*. The King asked the Queen whether she had anyone she would love more than she would love herself. To this

question the Queen answered in the negative. On being asked by the Queen the King too gave the same answer. Later when the King reported this conversation to the Buddha he said the following:

Even if one were to survey all directions by mind one would not discover anyone dearer than oneself. In this manner for each person oneself is dearer. Therefore one who loves oneself should not harm others¹⁸.

The conclusion drawn from self-love (*atta-kāmā*) is that one should not harm another who has a similar self-love (*tasmā na himse param attakāmo*). Similarly that beings love happiness (*sukha-kāmāni bhūtāni...*)¹⁹ and that they love happiness and despise pain (*sukha-kāmā dukkha-paṭikkūlā...*)²⁰ have been mentioned as a common characteristic of all beings. This too may be understood as supporting the same universal tendency.

In addition to this self-love existing in all beings, the discourses of the Buddha refer to some other characteristics of human nature which could be interpreted as proving the commonality of all beings. For instance, intimately connected with the self-protective tendency of all beings is their need for food or nutriment (*āhāra*). The Buddha says that “all beings subsist on nutriment” (*sabbesattā āhāraṭṭhitika*²¹), and makes a comprehensive analysis of nutriment on which beings subsist. According to the Buddha there are four kinds of nutriment, namely, edible food (*kabalīkāra-āhāra*), contact (*phassa-āhāra*), mental volition (*mano-sañcetanā-āhāra*) and consciousness (*viññāṇā-āhāra*). A glance at this classification shows that beings do not live by ‘bread’ alone. They need contacts for their senses, namely, for eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind they need forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tangible objects and mental phenomena (concepts). Mental volition is what lies behind human action for without volition (*cetanā*) there is no action. The last is consciousness which again arises based on the five sensory faculties plus mind as the mental faculty. While we consume edible foods for the sustenance of our physical body we consume all the time without stop food for our emotional and intellectual satisfaction.

¹⁸ Samyutta-nikāya I p.75.

¹⁹ Dhammapada 131

²⁰ Majjhima-nikāya I p.341.

²¹ Khuddaka-pātha p.?



Going further deep the Buddha explains:

Monks, these four kinds of nutriment have what as their source, what is their origin, from what are they born and produced? These four kinds of nutriment have craving as their source, craving as their origin, they are born and produced by craving²² .

In this analysis beings consume food because they are driven by craving which, in turn, is the main cause of suffering. All (unenlightened) beings are one is undergoing suffering. And in their desire to end suffering and attain happiness too ultimately all beings and all human beings in particular share an identical emotional universe, confirming thereby the universally shared nature of all beings.

Based on these universal characteristics of all beings in general and human beings in particular we can derive the five precepts (*pañca-sīla*), the most basic and fundamental of moral life. Refraining from taking life (and any other lesser harm) can be directly derived from the emotion of self-love present in all beings. Stealing always involves something that belongs to someone other than oneself. Sexual misconduct has been defined as illicit relationship with someone else's husband or wife or a woman who is under protection. Lying is to cheat someone else. In this manner all the vices associated with the first four precepts can be established as so on the assumed universal commonalities of all beings including their self-love. The fifth precept, one involving taking intoxicating drinks, is considered unacceptable presumably not because it is wrong in itself but because it plays a crucial role in causing the rest of the four vices. These five precepts are given as mandatory *sīla* for anyone becoming a follower of the Buddha. One moves to higher *sīlas* only subsequently.

The *Ratthapāla-sutta* of the Majjima-nikāya (82) lists four observations of reality and human nature understanding of which is believed to result in more radical forms of renunciation. When young and wealthy Ratthapāla leaves behind all his wealth and opts to become a monastic follower of the Buddha the ruler of the area

²² Samyutta-nikāya II pp.11-12 [tr. Bhikkhu Bodhi, 2000. p.540].

becomes puzzled. Questioned by him Raṭṭhapāla says that he made his decision having seen four things taught by the Buddha about the world. They are: The world is unstable, it is swept away (*upaniyyati loko addhuvo*), the world is without protection, and without Over Lord (*attano loko anabhissaro*), the world has nothing of its own, everything has to be left behind (*assako loko sabbaṁ pahāya gamaniyam*), and the world is incomplete, insatiate, and slave to craving (*ūno loko atitto taṇhā-dāso*). The first statement asserts that nothing in human life is certain or permanent. This is to affirm impermanence, the first characteristic of reality in the teaching of three signata (*ti-lakkhana*). The second asserts that there is no God to protect anyone in the world and that in this sense no beings have any real protection (from outside). The third is a corollary of the first, and says that one has to leave behind everything and has to depart from this life finally. The last most importantly asserts the incomplete-ness of all human beings which is the direct result of craving or ‘thirst’ (*taṇhā*). When further questioned by the King, Raṭṭhapāla establishes the validity of these claims with reference to King’s own life. He gets the King to see that each of these assertions is true and valid with reference to his own life. Therefore the assertions are not meant to be accepted as dogmatic truths. The verification of these assertions is one’s life itself which, in other words, means one’s own personal experience. What the King sees as valid for his own life is presented in the discourse not as individual-based truths but as truths to be applicable to all living beings. What is applicable to one person, or what seems to be applicable to all the known living beings at any given moment is considered to be applicable to all. In this sense we may take these assertions as inductive generalizations confirmed by experience.

For Raṭṭhapāla seeing these four realities was behind his decision to renounce his worldly life and assume a life of a mendicant working for freedom from samsaric suffering. Whether everyone who listened to the Buddha would have made the same decision is not a matter of logical necessity. The conclusion does not derive from the premises as a logical necessity. In fact one could even draw a conclusion totally opposite to that of Raṭṭhapāla from these premises. But the premises have been presented as universally available. The rationality of the choice depends on the overall attitude



to life one has developed. Speaking from a Buddhist point of view we may say that such a decision as that of Raṭṭhapāla comes from the maturity in spiritual preparation in the *samsārā* and it seems natural, given the raw character of ordinary puthujjanas, that only Raṭṭhapāla made this choice at this particular occasion. Raṭṭhapāla's decision was quite radical in terms of things he had to sacrifice and the changes he had to make in his own life as well as disruption it caused in the lives of others who associated with him. There may have been many others who were equally convinced of the truthfulness of this state of affairs of the *samsaric* life but were not able to make a similar decision. Yet, consequent to this understanding, they must have made adjustments of lesser degree in their ways of thinking and modes of life. Whether one were to follow the Path as a bhikkhu or as a householder, or not follow the Path at all, seems to have depended not necessarily on understanding but also on factors such as social circumstances, level of their own spiritual maturity and the like. Whatever these peripheral states of affairs the morality itself, as revealed in the above discussion seems to be based on certain shared characteristics of reality. Such characteristics are understood as subsumed in the 'three universal characteristics of reality', namely, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and no-soulness. Although the Buddhist morality may not be absolutist in theistic sense it is clear that within the conceptual universe governed by the understanding of three characteristics (*ti-lakkhana*) Raṭṭhapāla's decision has been given as undoubtedly correct.

The foundations of morality were thus expected to be seen by oneself in relation to one's own life and the nature of life in general. It is clear that the ethics/morality advocated by the Buddha did not come as inviolable injunctions similar to those in a theistic religious system. The general attitude of Buddhism to authority, personal or non-personal, and the attitude of the disciples toward the Buddha himself have been discussed in detail by scholars²³. What has been discussed mainly in the context of epistemology seems relevant in ethics. Thus one who follows the Path is expected to do so not because one has special obligation for the Buddha, or because one is scared of violating a rule prescribed by the Buddha. The function of *karma* as taught by the Buddha has nothing to do with the Buddha

²³ K.N. Jayatilleke (1963): see chapters iv and viii.

or any other person for that matter ²⁴. It works subject to the law of dependent co-origination (*paticca-sammuppāda*). Following the Path as a *bhikkhu* by observing the *pāṭimokkha* rules or living the life of a householder observing the five precepts is understood as a voluntary act. The Buddha does not come to the picture either as inflictor of punishment or a dispenser of rewards. In other words, there is no such a thing as ‘sinning against the Buddha’ in the Buddhist tradition. By violating a moral precept of the nature of the *pañca-sīla* one is only violating a promise given to oneself and it is a moral act the consequence of which one has to bear by oneself alone. Violation of *vinaya* rules by *bhikkhus* and *bhikkhunis* is dealt with by the *Sangha* as a matter of *vinaya*. The function of karma has no connection to this ‘legal’ procedure.

Does this seemingly ultra-rational attitude prevail all the time? Does Buddhism reject the need for an authority altogether in one’s moral life? The answer does not seem to be a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The emotion of fear (*ottappa* or *bhaya*) is known to play a role in religious life. It does not seem to be different in Buddhism too. The idea of ‘fear for the *samsārā*’ (*samsārā-bhaya*) is an emotion valued in the tradition. *samsārā* includes various types of dangers one will have to undergo in the samsaric journey including being born in where there is no happiness (*apāya/niraya* =hell [*apa*+*aya*/ *nir*+*aya* = place without income]). The discourses refer to four kinds of fear relevant for this context ²⁵. They are the fear of being censured by oneself (*attanuvada-bhaya*), the fear of being censured by others (*parānuvāda-bhaya*), fear of punishment (*danda-bhaya*) and the fear of bad destiny (*duggati-bhaya*). All these four fears are described as sentiments that help one to stay focused in one’s spiritual life. It is interesting to note that the commentarial tradition defines the term ‘*bhikkhu*’ with reference to the fear for the *samsārā* ²⁶. It is this fear that motivates one to follow the Path properly as

²⁴ The concept of Yama as the king of the hell responsible for punishing the wrong-doers has been accommodated in the discourses with some unease for the presence of someone over and above the karma causation does not go well with the Buddhist *karma* theory. The *Devaduta-sutta* (Majjhima-nikāya: 130) makes a good compromise by maintaining that Yama, by being himself condemned to condemn others, is undergoing the result of a bad *karma* committed by himself. See Tilakaratne (2003) for a detailed discussion.

²⁵ Ānguttara-nikāya II pp.121-3.

²⁶ *Samsāre bhayaṃ ikkhatiti bhikkhu*: A bhikkhu is one who perceives fear in the *samsārā*. Visuddhimagga p.3.



a *bhikkhu/bhikkhuni*, or live a simple religious life as a householder. The difference in this emotion of fear and that of God or any other supernatural being is whereas the former has no reference to a person, the latter is centred on a person. Along with fear is mentioned moral scruple (*hiri* or *lajja*=sense of shame), and the two have been described as ‘divine qualities’ (*deva-dhamma*) for their crucial role is one’s moral life.

The concept of superiority (*adhipateyya*) plays a similar role in the field of morality. In a way this concept answers the question: why should one lead a moral life? The moral life in this context is not exclusively that of a *bhikkhu*, but the moral life in general. The Dhamma gives three reasons, namely, the superiority of oneself (*atta-adhipateyya*), the superiority of the world (*loka-adhipateyya*), and the superiority of the Dhamma (*dhamma-adhipateyya*)²⁷. In the absence of any superior divine power from where laws originate one is at one’s own initiative to lead a moral life. But there are forces to be recognized as providing safeguards for one’s moral life. The first is to reflect on one’s own status as one who has dedicated one’s life for the practice of the Path and make a resolution to stay focused on the Path. One’s own conscience which blames one when one behaves wrongly too has been mentioned in the discourses as a moral safeguard. The second is the religious people with developed faculties and powerful divine beings who are capable of penetrating one’s mind. In a broad sense this refers to the external world which observes one’s behaviour. For example, for a *bhikkhu* this could be one’s own community of fellow *bhikkhus* or the lay society that supports him. The *viññu-purisas* of the society too may be included in this category. Of the fears mentioned above the first and the second, namely, fear of being censured by oneself and others seem to correspond to these two kinds of superiority. The last is the Dhamma taught by the Buddha. This could also mean what is right and good in a universal sense. When taken from this broad sense, it has been said that one should rather lose one’s life than violating the Dhamma²⁸. This last seems to provide the ultimate basis for the moral life.

²⁷ Aṅguttara-nikāya I pp 147-150.

²⁸ *Dhanam caje aṅgavarassa hetu – aṅgam caje jīvitam rakkhamāno Aṅgam dhanam jīvitam cāpi sabbam – caje naro dhammamanussaranto* (Visuddhimagga, p.47) (let one leave wealth for the sake of physical limbs. Let one leave physical limbs for the sake of life. Let one leave everything, wealth, physical limbs and life, for the sake of Dhamma.)

The former two also seem to rest on the last for the basis on which one's own self or the world blames someone is the Dhamma. The significance of this classification is that it shows that Buddhism does not reject the idea of superiority or the need to have a sense of being subordinate to some higher authority in one's moral life. According to this analysis one needs to obey some authority as providing check on one's moral life. But this authority is not any particular person, nor is it a god capable of inflicting punishment on those who violate such rules.

Conclusion

In a theistic system the sense of fear toward the creator God and his possible punishment work as a deterrent against violating rules. At the same time possibility of reward from the same source works as an incentive for good behaviour. It is clear that these concepts do not operate in the same manner in Buddhism. But the concepts of superiority and fear mentioned above appear to be playing a similar role in the moral life of one who follows the Path. For example, being born in a *duggati* is the 'punishment' one receives for being immoral. The karmic causation however is a natural process for which personal intervention is not needed. This way of understanding shows that for the Buddha mere observance of morality without right view (*sammā-ditthi*) is of not much use.

As our preceding discussion showed *sīla* as ethics is an integral aspect of the path leading to *nirvana*. When one moves higher in the Path one takes it along and does not leave it behind. The completion of the Path is the culmination of *kusala* by shedding all *akusala*. Any form of existence or *bhava*, be it the bhava of pleasure, fine materiality or immateriality it is a result of *lobha* which is a root of *akusala*. The ultimate goal is to be free from all forms of existence. During the time of the Buddha it seems that all or majority of those entered the *saṅgha* strived to achieve the final goal in their very life itself. Consequently to be born in a pleasant destiny (*sugati*) was not an option for them. Hence they were not interested in practicing meritorious deeds such as *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* or to put it more accurately, they did not practice these three as meritorious deeds. There is evidence in the discourses to the effect that those who lived the holy life for the sake of worldly pleasures were laughed at by



their fellow practitioners. The case of the householders was different. For them the goal was to live a good life here in this world and hope for a good destiny after death. (According to the *Sigalovada-sutta*, one of the ‘duties’ of the religious people toward the householders, who supply them with requisites, is to teach the way to heaven.) The distinction of *puñña/pāpa* was more meaningful with this way of life. The co-existence between *nirvana* as the immediate goal and the lay life were not considered to be an easy task. The best form of life for one who is intent on *nirvana* was to leave home and move into homelessness. In the story of Raṭṭhapāla discussed above his parents remind him that he can both live a good life (life of pleasures) and engage in meritorious deeds with his vast fortune. His wives inquire about the divine damsels for the sake whom, they presume, Raṭṭhapāla was to leave them behind. The attitude of parents and wives represent the samsaric dimension of observing morality. But for *Raṭṭhapāla samsāra* was not an option. Hence he was not interested in *puñña*; nor was he interested in divine damsels he was to get in return for his *puñña*. Nevertheless, a person who is devoted to a life of *puñña* is undoubtedly an ethical/moral person. Likewise a person who observes the basic five precepts also is an ethical/moral person. But *kusala* captures a different dimension. This is purely the nirvanic dimension, and if our present ethical discourse cannot adequately capture it the problem is not with this radically different ethical category. It is true that the path of the Buddha in its proper sense is one leading directly to *nirvana*. But the practical reality starting from the time of the Buddha himself was that there grew up a group of lay people who, while ideally participated in the ideal of *nirvana*, had to strive to have it both ways. What we find mostly in the traditional Buddhist societies today, among both the lay people and the monks and nuns, is the practice of *puñña* with the wish that it will bring about the final goal *nirvana*, of course as the very final thing after enjoying all the imaginable pleasures both human and divine!

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