

## THERAVĀDA BUDDHIST ETHICS

*Wit Wisadavet*

**A**mong philosophical circles there are two fundamental ethical questions which are a focus of interest for philosophers of various schools. The first is the question of the supreme objective in life; the second is the question of what is to be used as a gauge for good and evil actions, for deciding which actions are right and which are wrong. We will be examining the Buddhist perspective on these two questions.

### **The supreme objective in life**

According to the Buddhist view the objective of life can be looked at from two perspectives: the negative and the positive. The negative perspective is the escape from suffering. The positive perspective is attainment of happiness. People tend to look on Buddhism in the sense of escaping suffering, which is the negative perspective. This perspective arises from the core teaching of Buddhism, the four noble truths, which deal with the presence of suffering, the cause of suffering, the state of cessation of suffering, and the way for attaining the cessation of suffering. Thus it seems that Buddhism stresses suffering, which, while true in a sense, is not the whole truth, as we shall see.

Buddhism believes that suffering arises from people not seeing things as they really are, according to their true nature. According to Buddhism human beings create the world by giving value and meaning to things. Once they have given meaning to a something, people expect that thing to proceed a certain way. But things fare according to their own nature and are not within our capacity to control completely. When they do not fare as we wish them to we experience disappointment and suffering. While human beings are able to control things in some areas, our desires are endless, so we assign meanings to the world endlessly and impatiently expect things from the world. So human suffering arises repeatedly.

The important agent for our giving meaning to the things of the world, which eventually causes us to suffer, is *taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* means wanting, but it is not all kinds of wanting. When someone is thirsty and wants to drink water, or is cold and wants to put on a coat, this is not *taṇhā*. It may be

called a natural need. *Arahants*, who are done with *taṇhā*, can have such wants. It is said that an *arahant* is one with few wants (*appiccho*). The wanting that is *taṇhā* is wanting that is not in accordance with nature, or that is excessive, such as feeling cold and wanting not just a coat but an expensive and beautiful one. We conceive *taṇhā* when there is greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) in the mind. These three motivations are expressions of the one thing, and that is the feeling that there is an *I* or self. Greed (*lobha*) is the desire to have something that is not one's right or which is beyond one's capacity. It arises because of the feeling that things have to be 'mine.' Anger arises because of the feeling that the *I* is being hurt or criticized. Delusion arises because there is the feeling that there is an *I* that knows and is everything. Thus if we were to speak more profoundly we would have to say that suffering arises from giving meaning to the world, and that giving meaning to the world is the work of *taṇhā*. Ultimately *taṇhā* arises from the feeling that 'this is me.' The transcendence of suffering can only arise when this feeling is destroyed, and that happens when we see things according to the truth.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism teaches not only escaping from suffering, but also experiencing happiness, but it lays emphasis on suffering because before one can experience happiness it is necessary to transcend suffering. A man with a toothache suffers. If he applies medicine and the pain goes away this does not mean he is happy, but only that he has escaped the suffering. But once his toothache is healed and he can read a favorite book, then he can be said to experience happiness.

Philosophers of almost every school will agree that the most valuable thing in life is happiness, but different schools have different ideas of what happiness is. Buddhism teaches that happiness is what is of value in life, but happiness in the Buddhist understanding contains aspects that are both similar to and different from other schools. Buddhism divides the levels and kinds of happiness in many different ways,<sup>2</sup> but regardless of the kind of classification they encompass the same meaning. Here I will

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<sup>1</sup> See Wit Wisadavet, 'Treatment of anattā in the suttas,' *Research Journal*, Chulalongkorn University, June 2519, pp. 91-105.

<sup>2</sup> See Phra Rājavaramunī, *Buddhadhamma* (Bangkok: Mahāchulālongkorn University Press, 1986), p. 565.

divide happiness according to the Buddhist threefold classification: (1) sensual happiness; (2) *jhāna* happiness; (3) *nibbāna* happiness.

### **Kāmasukha: sensual happiness**

Most unenlightened beings (*puthujjana*) have some *taṇhā*, more or less. Their having *taṇhā* causes them to attribute meanings to the world and place expectations in it. Sometimes they get what they want and experience happiness, but sometimes they are disappointed and experience suffering. The happiness that arises in this way is physical or material. It is called *kāmasukha* (sensual happiness) and broadly speaking it may be said to encompass social kinds of happiness, such as rank and honor, the pleasure of friendship, etc. They are all experiences of happiness from things in the world outside the person (i.e., material objects, plants, animals and fellow humans). If the experience of happiness from the outside world is allowed to go unchecked, it becomes suffering. Being excessively engrossed in and abandoned to this kind of happiness not only puts oneself in a state of inability to experience happiness again, but also causes unrest in society, leading to contention, exploitation and injustice. Society may fall into such a state of turmoil that no one has a chance to experience this kind of happiness.

A country's laws may help to prevent this state of turmoil, but laws can only help to an extent. They may be able to prevent other people from snatching away the food we are eating, but they cannot force them to give us food when we are hungry and have nothing to eat. Laws cannot make people friendly to each other or respect each other. These things arise from principles of practice other than laws. However, the most important thing that laws cannot give us is an inner state of mind that is conducive to the experience of sensual happiness. As a simple example, people whose minds are constantly prey to envy, to covetousness, or to thoughts of revenge will have no chance to experience happiness from the outside world.

Buddhism teaches that the experience of sensual happiness can only proceed smoothly when people have morality (*sīla*). The elementary level of morality is the five precepts: not destroying life, not wrongfully taking things belonging to others, not telling lies, not committing sexual

misconduct and not taking intoxicants. These five precepts are elementary training rules that minimize the obstacles to enjoying sensual happiness. If the 'five dhammas' are also practiced, those obstacles are reduced even further. The five dhammas are having goodwill and kindness, making a living honestly, constraining and controlling oneself in respect to sensual pleasures, being honest, and having mindfulness and heedfulness at all times.

Buddhism does not see the enjoyment of happiness from the outside world, or sensual happiness, as an evil; it merely states that there are higher kinds of happiness.<sup>3</sup> There are many levels on which sensual happiness can be experienced. If it is enjoyed immorally or deludedly it will lead to more suffering than happiness. If it is enjoyed morally, not harming others, with restraint and moderation, always bearing in mind that enjoyment of sensual happiness entails a mixture of both happiness and suffering, then when one is disappointed one can accept that disappointment as only natural, and when one is successful one does not become inflated over it. If one can practice in this way sensual happiness is not an evil, but something of value to unenlightened beings. The highest level of enjoyment of sensual happiness is enjoying only enough to enable life to proceed comfortably in order to seek the higher levels of happiness—but this may not be sensual happiness at all.

The Buddhist view on material happiness is a middle way between two extreme views. The first is the view of the religious ascetics in India in the Buddha's time, who believed that in order to attain the highest state it was necessary to discard the body and thereby more easily purify the mind. The Buddha had used the method of self-mortification but found that it was not the way to reach truth. The Buddha's disciples were often denigrated by other groups of renunciants as not truly pure because they did not denounce the body. The other extreme is the view of ordinary people who see pleasures of the flesh as the highest happiness, and believe that we should search for as much of them as we can. This too is not the way to truth. The Buddha walked the middle way, not abandoning himself

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<sup>3</sup> Tipiṭaka: 13/398. (The *Tipiṭaka* used by the author in this paper is the *Royal Thai* version; the first number refers to the volume and the second number refers to the passage-editor.)

to sensual happiness, and not seeing the body as a prison binding the mind as some religions and philosophical schools believed.

### **Jhānasukha: the happiness of absorption**

While sensual happiness is not an evil, it is a coarse and ephemeral form of happiness. Devas enjoy sensual happiness in the heaven realms, but even though the happiness of the heaven realms is so refined and exalted, it is not as subtle as the next level of happiness. The objects that provide sensual happiness are limited in number: there is not enough for everyone, so contention and argument follow.

On account of sensual pleasures, king contends with king, brahmin contends with brahmin... mother contends with son, son contends with mother... father contends with son, son contends with father... friend contends with friend...<sup>4</sup>

Awareness of moderation in the search for sensual happiness has a good effect both on society and on oneself. The next level of happiness up from sensual happiness is the happiness of the absorptions (*jhāna*). It may be called mental happiness. *Jhāna* translates as 'stare,' referring to the state of mind that has reached a certain level of concentration (*samādhi*). *Jhāna* happiness is the frontier between sensual happiness and the happiness of *nibbāna*, which is the highest kind of happiness. *Jhāna* happiness does not arise from contact through the five senses, or enjoyment of the five sense pleasures (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches). It is a happiness that is not tainted with suffering like sensual happiness. *Jhāna* happiness arises from the cultivation of the mind known as meditation practice. The mind that has developed concentration up to the level of absorption (*jhāna*) has temporarily escaped from defilements and craving (if the escape is final it is called *nibbāna*). It is characterized by peace, serenity, clarity and the power to attain the highest level of truth.

In the mental training leading up to the attainment of *jhāna* it is necessary to overcome five important obstacles (known as the five *nīvaraṇa* or hindrances). They are 1. *kāmachanda*, desire for this and that; 2. *byāpāda*, anger and resentment; 3. *thīnamiddha*, dullness and depression; 4. *uddhaccakukkucca*, restlessness and anxiety; and 5.

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<sup>4</sup> Tipiṭaka: 12/198.

*vicikicchā*, doubt and uncertainty about the results of one's practice. When the five hindrances have been given up and the mind is clear, there arises a feeling of mental satiation, which is directly opposite to physical satiation. It is a purely mental kind of well-being independent of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and tangible sensations. The person who shakes off the five hindrances is compared to a person who has recovered from an illness: he is stronger and ready to work for the higher kind of happiness. *Jhāna* happiness may be called the happiness that arises from concentration, as it what results when concentration is developed to a certain level.

*Jhāna* happiness is similar to sensual happiness in that it still requires certain conditions to provide feelings. Feeling is called *vedanā* and it arises when the mind cognizes certain objects. The things the mind cognizes are called *ārammaṇa*. Sensual happiness is the pleasant feeling (*sukhavedanā*) that arises from cognizing *ārammaṇa* in the form of sights, tastes, smells, sounds and tangibles; i.e., the physical sensations. *Jhāna* happiness is also a feeling (*vedanā*), a pleasant feeling (*sukhavedanā*), just like sensual happiness. It differs in that its object (*ārammaṇa*) is mental objects (*dhammārammaṇa*): not physical sensations but thoughts, mental images, or mental states. *Jhāna* happiness has two levels. The initial level has 'materiality' (*rūpadhamma*) as object. It is the happiness that arises from concentrating on the in and out breaths, for example. The higher level has immaterial objects as object. It is the happiness that arises from concentration on emptiness, for example. (In some cases mental objects can also be objects of sensual happiness.) While *jhāna* happiness is not the happiness that results from material things, it still requires certain objects (even if they are not material), and so it can still be cause for clinging (*upādāna*). Thus it is not the highest kind of happiness.

### **Nibbānasukha: the happiness of nibbāna**

Buddhism holds *nibbāna* to be the highest or supreme happiness (*paramasukha*).<sup>5</sup> *Nibbāna* is an experience that each person must have for him- or her-self. One who attains it may describe it to others, but one's listeners have no way of knowing what one experienced. Even so, the

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<sup>5</sup> *Tiṇṇaka*: 25/25.



Buddha did talk about this experience and it is related in the *Tipiṭaka*. Scholars, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, have interpreted these passages in all sorts of ways, but there are a number of core points to these interpretations.

*Nibbāna* is usually explained as cessation, here meaning the cessation of *taṇhā*, craving, or *upādāna*, clinging. The Buddha sometimes explained *nibbāna* as the state in which desire (*rāga*), aversion (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*)<sup>6</sup> come to cessation. When a person still has desire, aversion and delusion, this creates clinging. Clinging is what causes people to create the world by giving it meanings and values, as already stated. The world is not seen as it actually is. *Nibbāna* is seeing the world as it actually is rather than as we would want it to be. Controlling the defilement of craving enables people to see the world as it is:

He who realizes all worlds, knows all worlds as they actually are, separates himself from the world, has no defilements in the world, controls all mental states and has thrown off all defilements is one who experiences *nibbāna*, which is the highest peace...<sup>7</sup>

The phrase 'separates himself from the world' does not mean that in order to attain *nibbāna* one must close one's eyes and ears and refuse to know anything about the outside world. There is still awareness of the outside world, but it is awareness that is without desire, aversion and delusion, as in, for instance, 'seeing a form with the eye he is not delighted or offended but abides in equanimity though mindfulness and clear comprehension.'<sup>8</sup> It is seeing with impartiality, not anger, greed or delusion. Greed, anger and delusion arise as a result of clinging to a self (*attā*), attaching a self to everything. For example, one donates money to a charitable cause because one hopes that one's name will be printed in the newspaper. When one does not see it one is disappointed. This is because the donation was made with self. If the donation was made simply to help one's fellows without any expectation of anything in return, not seeing one's name in the paper would not cause suffering. This is 'separating

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<sup>6</sup> Tipiṭaka: 18/497.

<sup>7</sup> Tipiṭaka: 21/23.

<sup>8</sup> Tipiṭaka: 11/429.

oneself from the world.' Separating oneself from the world, one still lives in this world but one is not attached:

Monks, a lotus, a red lotus, a white lotus, takes root in the water, grows in the water, rises above the water, but the water does not stick to it. In the same way, the *Tathāgata* arises in the world, grows in the world, but he conquers the world. He is not stained by the world.<sup>9</sup>

One of the characteristics of one who attains *nibbāna* is '*nirāsa*.' Phra Rājavaramunī explains this as follows: the word literally means 'void of hope,' but actually it should rather be translated as 'beyond hope.' That is, ordinary unenlightened beings live with hope. This hope is based on desire. People who are disappointed may give up hope because they know there is no way of fulfilling their hope. Deep in their hearts they still desire that object, but they do not know how to get it. Those who are beyond hope are those who have no desires. There is nothing they need to hope for. They live without the need for hope and are perfect and contented within themselves. It is impossible for them to be disappointed.<sup>10</sup>

The happiness of *nibbāna* differs from sensual happiness and *jhāna* happiness in that the two latter are 'pleasant feeling' (*sukhavedanā*); that is, they are happiness in response to certain things, certain things feed them, and what feeds them is objects (*ārammaṇa*). *Jhāna* happiness feeds on mental objects (*dhammārammaṇa*), while sensual happiness depends on all kinds of objects, especially the five sense pleasures. While *jhāna* happiness is independent of material things, it can still lead to clinging. The mind is not really, wholly pure. The happiness of *nibbāna* is an experience that is not dependent on any object. It is a subtle kind of happiness perfect within itself. It is not a happiness that arises from feeding a desire or filling a lack, but a happiness that arises and exists of itself. It is an experience in and of itself, not a way of experiencing something else. It is not concerned with anything in the world, not even with the experience of emptiness, which is the purest kind of mental experience.

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<sup>9</sup> Tipiṭaka: 17/241.

<sup>10</sup> See Phra Rājavaramunī, *Buddhadhamma* (Bangkok: Mahāchulālongkorn University Press, 1986), p. 246.



Phra Rājavaramunī explains that while one who attains *nibbāna* is one who has happiness, he will not be attached to any happiness, even the happiness of *nibbāna*. When the *arahant* cognizes an external object he still experiences feeling contingent on that object, be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neither pleasant nor unpleasant, just like ordinary people. But he differs in that his experience of feeling is devoid of defilements. For him feeling does not lead on to craving (*taṇhā*). It is an experience of physical feeling, not mental feeling. So while the six objects may change, the *arahant* does not experience suffering.<sup>11</sup>

In the practice for attaining *nibbāna* there are three stages: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Morality can enable people to experience initial happiness, but on its own it cannot lead to the attainment of *nibbāna*. Morality is a necessary provision for *nibbāna*, but it is not enough. That is, without morality it is not possible to proceed to *nibbāna*, but morality alone is not enough to take one there. Morality helps to make the mind normal and prime it for the development of concentration, but concentration on its own, again, does not lead to *nibbāna*. It can bring only *jhāna* happiness. The final stage for attaining *nibbāna* is wisdom. Concentration prepares the mind to use wisdom to contemplate things as they really are, to see with insight (*vipassanā*).

Attainment of *nibbāna* is not absorption with God because *nibbāna* is not God. *Nibbāna* did not create the world and does not support the world in a moral sense or in terms of its continuation. *Nibbāna* is not an 'entity,' not a material or mental object. Devas and hell beings are 'entities.' Even though ordinary people cannot see them, people who have developed concentration to a certain level can see them. *Nibbāna* cannot be seen with the divine eye (*dibbacakkhu*), but it can be seen with the wisdom eye (*paññācakkhu*). Thus *nibbāna* is not an entity as are heaven and hell.

In the *suttas* certain words are used to describe *nibbāna* which may lead to the conception that *nibbāna* is a metaphysical entity. For example it is said that *nibbāna* has the characteristics of being *abhūta* (unchanging), *akata* (uncreated), *ajāta* (unborn), and *amata* (undying).<sup>12</sup> These words

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>12</sup> *Tipiṭaka*: 25/159.

invite us to think of *nibbāna* as something eternal, uncreated, existing of itself, not born from anything and continuing on, i.e., not dying. The *Abhidhamma* texts encourage even more the understanding that *nibbāna* is a metaphysical entity in its division of ultimate realities (*paramattha-dhamma*) into four categories: materiality (*rūpa*), mind (*citta*), mental concomitants (*cetasika*), and *nibbāna*,<sup>13</sup> inviting the deduction that *nibbāna* is an ultimate reality.

However explanations occurring in other parts of the *Tiṭṭaka* do not at all invite the deduction that *nibbāna* is a metaphysical entity. The descriptions of *nibbāna* given above are more likely to be referring to the non returning of one who attains *nibbāna* to be born or die again, since he has transcended the cycle of *samsāra*. The term *nibbāna* is used to describe the state of the mind having utterly transcended craving and clinging. It is a state in which the mind experiences certain things which cannot be experienced in a life for which happiness means merely the fulfilling of desires. *Nibbāna* may be said to be a psychological state—not one that ordinary unenlightened beings know of, but one experienced only by those who have developed their minds to a certain level.

Summarizing, the objective of life according to Buddhism is to develop the attainment of happiness as far as one can from the lower levels up to the highest. People who are living with morality have a certain level of happiness, the development of concentration yields a subtler kind of happiness, and ultimately the use of wisdom yields the highest kind of happiness.

### Comparison with Western philosophy

Western philosophy has many different ideas on the highest value in life, but they can be divided into two main groups: those who search for what is of value in the outside world, and those who search for what is of value internally. Within the first group are the Romantics who believe that emotion is of the highest value, that emotion is more important than reason because it is conducive to individual expression, that good and evil are conventional realities, and that freedom of expression without

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<sup>13</sup> *Abhidhammatthasaṅgaha*, Division I.

constraints is a good thing. We can clearly see that this kind of thinking is far removed from Buddhism.

Another school of the first group is the hedonists, who hold that happiness, especially physical happiness, is of the highest value, that human beings all seek happiness and it is impossible for them to seek anything else. Some of the important thinkers in this group, such as Mill, tried to divide happiness into low and high levels, i.e., physical and mental happiness, but they stated that the higher level, mental happiness, was higher than the lower happiness because it was more stable, safer, and more economical, in which case the difference between the two is merely a superficial one, not a substantial one. Thus happiness in Mill's view would correspond with the sensual happiness of the Buddhist interpretation, and hedonism is also very different from Buddhism.

Among those who sought happiness internally is the school known as the Stoics. They believed that mental happiness was the most valuable thing in life, that peace of mind did not arise from struggling to find desire objects but from quenching the desire itself, and that people should master their minds. If they are still deluded by external things and tie themselves too tightly to them they will experience only disappointment. Happiness and suffering are in the mind. External objects cannot really do anything to us if our minds are strong. Thus if thieves burgle our home and we suffer, we should not be angry at the thieves but at ourselves for not being able to prevent ourselves from feeling sad at our loss.

This idea is very similar to Buddhism. The Stoics differ in that they taught people to separate themselves from desire and that was all. They did not offer a different kind of experience that people could obtain. That is, their teaching went only so far as the negative aspect of experience, it did not deal with the positive aspect. In Buddhism, however, human beings are capable of experiencing two higher levels of happiness: *jhāna* happiness and *nibbāna* happiness, the happiness arising from concentration and the happiness arising from wisdom. Peace, according to the Stoics, while entailing fleeing material things, was nevertheless related to them. The *jhāna* happiness and *nibbāna* happiness of Buddhism, on the other hand, are new, a different kind of psychological experience, quite different from the normal kind.

In this second group are the 'intellectuals,' a term which may be used to refer to views that are Aristotelian in nature. Aristotle stated that what is of value in life is happiness, which may be divided into three levels. The first level is creature happiness, the happiness arising from eating and sleeping. The second level is human happiness, the happiness people obtain from living together in a society, such as friendship, honor, shows of bravery and expressions of justice. According to Buddhism, these are both included within sensual happiness.

Aristotle called the highest level of happiness 'higher vision,' meaning realization. It is the vision that arises from pure wisdom, not the knowledge used for seeking the first two kinds of happiness. It is a 'rest' attained through wisdom, not physical or mental rest taken in order to continue activity refreshed, which is rest with an ulterior objective. Higher vision is true rest in and of itself with no ulterior objective. It is the enjoyment of happiness for its own sake, an experience that is perfect within itself, requiring nothing else for its support. Aristotle called higher vision 'celestial happiness.'<sup>14</sup>

Aristotelian happiness is very close to *jhāna* happiness and *nibbāna* happiness in Buddhism, and it would be very difficult for someone without experience of both to say whether they were the same or different. They are similar in that the *jhāna* happiness of Buddhism is a way of resting for those who have developed concentration up to a certain level. *Nibbāna* and *higher vision* are both 'seeing' with wisdom, experiences that are perfect within themselves requiring no support from anything else. But where they do differ is that Buddhism organizes and analyzes methods for attaining this point in detail, while Aristotle does not give any method, believing that whenever there was a search for truth for its own sake, with no ulterior motive, this is searching for higher vision.

### Criteria for actions

Regarding Buddhist criteria for judging whether actions should or should not be done, whether they are good or evil, it can be broadly said that good action is any action that arises from the roots of skillfulness

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 303-309.

(*kusalamūla*) of non-greed, non-anger, and non-delusion, which render the mind clear, pure, calm and untroubled, while evil actions are actions that arise from the roots of unskillfulness (*akusalamūla*) of greed, hatred and delusion, which render the mind troubled, agitated, unclear and impure.<sup>15</sup> These are the basic criteria. There are other factors that need to be taken into account as will be discussed presently. The author feels that if the Buddhist view on the subject is compared with the views of a number of well-known philosophers it will be more clearly seen.

#### *Buddhism and Kant*

The world's most eminent ethicist is the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). His ethical idea is very similar to, but not quite the same as, the Buddhist view. He felt that the most valuable thing in life was not happiness (by which he meant what Buddhism refers to as *kāmasukha*), but morality or good actions. Good actions must never arise from emotion, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. To help a person in need out of pity is not a morally good action because pity is an emotion. Morally good actions must arise from reason and wisdom. A person who acts on wisdom is one who completely shakes off his emotions, instincts and self interests and holds to the moral law. Kant's moral law is 'Follow the principle that you would wish to see as a universal law.' This means that in deciding to do something one must adhere to some kind of principle as a guideline. If when doing that action one would wish the principle to which one is adhering to be followed by everyone, the action is right, but if one wishes to follow that principle alone the action is wrong. If one were the supervisor of a certain job and one helped one of one's relatives to gain a position there, knowing full well that one's relative was not as good as another person, adhering to the principle 'Help your relatives fair or foul,' then this is a wrong action because it is not possible that one would want this principle to be followed by everyone. One would want other people to follow the principle 'Fairness takes precedence over relatives and partisanship.'

Kant and Buddhism are the same in that both are 'absolutist.' Absolutism is the idea that an action is good or evil not because of the

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<sup>15</sup> See Phra Rājavarāmunī, *Buddhadhamma*, pp. 162-180.



results it leads to, but because it conforms with certain fixed and absolute criteria. As soon as the action is done it can be determined as good or evil without having to wait to see whether its results are good or bad. In this sense, theistic religions are absolutist in that good actions are actions that conform with the decree of God. God and his decrees are fixed and absolute, they do not change with time and place. Kant's philosophy was absolutist because he saw good actions as actions that conformed to the moral law, and the moral law is fixed and absolute since it was not thought up by human beings to fit a certain time. It is rather a law that conforms with the core of human nature, which is wisdom. Wisdom is the true element of all human beings, even though different people use it to different degrees.

Buddhism is absolutist in that the three roots of skillfulness and the three roots of unskillfulness are the fixed and absolute criteria for judging actions. To say that the three roots of skillfulness are criteria for judging actions is tantamount to saying that *nibbāna* is the criterion for judging

Actions that lead to *nibbāna* can be called good actions, while actions that lead away from *nibbāna* can be called bad actions. *Nibbāna* is *akālika*, beyond time. While *nibbāna* is not a metaphysical entity, it is a state that has a fixed nature. It does not change according to people's feelings and thoughts. In regard to the results of actions, while Buddhism does not take results to be a principle for judging action, they should be taken into consideration (as will be discussed below). As for Kant, results do not come into the consideration at all.

Societies of different times and places may have different laws, customs and traditions. They reward actions that conform to these conventions and punish actions that oppose them. These rewards or punishments may be physical, mental or social. While people living in different societies may have different social lives, they are all people just the same. As people they live under the same moral law—that people who do things without greed, hatred and delusion are clear, their minds are pure and conducive to the attainment of *nibbāna*, so their actions are said to be good, while people who do things with minds full of greed, hatred and delusion are confused, their minds are impure and not conducive to attaining *nibbāna*, so their actions are wrong.



A society's morality may or may not conform with natural moral law. The things a society deems to be good may lead to mental impurity, make people more agitated and more contentious and lead to an increase in greed, hatred and delusion. If that is so, then they are good according to that society but wrong according to the natural moral law. For example, while drinking alcohol is approved of by society, it has a negative effect on the mind and so is wrong. Sometimes social conventions conform with moral laws: theft, for instance, is wrong both socially and morally. Wrong actions are always wrong, whether their perpetrators are aware or not that they are doing something wrong. In the *Milindapañhā* the question is asked: who will incur the most wrong between a person who does something knowing that it is wrong and knowing its consequences, and another person who does not know. The answer is given that the person who does not know incurs more wrong. This seems odd because a person who breaks the law may be granted leniency if he does not know it. However, such matters cannot be compared with social laws. They must be compared with natural reality:

There is a ball of iron that has been fired red hot. One person knows that it is red-hot iron, another person does not know: if both of those people were made to take hold of the red-hot iron ball, which of them would grasp it more tightly and be burned by it more severely?

Would the person who knew grasp it firmly? Only the one who did not know would grasp it fully, and so he would be more severely burned.

In the same way... one who does not know that actions are wrong and how much harm there is in them has no compunction and may do fully as he wishes. He can commit even very evil deeds, unaware that in doing them he must receive a dire result... For this reason I say that the one who does not know incurs more wrong.<sup>16</sup>

According to Buddhism whatever people do they must receive the consequences, regardless of what they or society feels about it. Right and wrong are fixed and absolute. Another point on which Buddhism and Kant have very similar views is the idea that one who does good actions is one who has transcended the view 'I and mine,' as already stated. For Kant, the person who does good is one who is fully prepared to have the

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<sup>16</sup> *Milindapañhā* (Thai Version), pp. 107-108.

principle he adheres to in doing that action become a principle for all people. We could say that he is prepared to have his personal principle for action become a universal principle. The wrong doer wants a special privilege; he wants to see the principle to which he holds apply only to himself, and a different principle apply to other people. Kant's view therefore reduces one's own sense of self-importance, reducing one's 'self' to equal status with others.

In Buddhism human actions have two kinds of motivations. The first is the three roots of unskillfulness (greed, anger, delusion), the second is the three roots of skillfulness (non-greed, non-anger, non-delusion). Actions arising from the roots of unskillfulness are actions performed under the control of the feeling of self:

For any action that is led by greed, arisen from greed, has greed as cause, has greed as source, the state of self in that action arises and the action produces results. When results arise, the doer experiences the results of that action... for any action that is led by aversion... for any action that is led by delusion... a state of self arises in that action...<sup>17</sup>

Greed, anger, and delusion lead to the feeling of self. These three motivations for action cannot be separated from the self or 'me.' Greed has 'me' as a supporting base, anger has 'me' at its core, and delusion is the foolishness and delusion in 'me.' Greed, anger and delusion are thus merely three different expressions of 'me.' Actions that are free of greed, anger and delusion 'attain to cessation, are uprooted and made like a palm tree stump, with no chance of arising again.' This means that they lead to escape from the cycle of *samsāra* and ultimately to *nibbāna*. Thus we can interpret wrong actions as actions entailing a self, and right actions as actions done without a self. Those who do the highest good are those who see with right wisdom as it is that 'that is not mine, I am not that, that is not my self.' Buddhism and Kant are similar on this point only partly. Kant believed in a God and that human beings had an immortal soul. He did not teach *anattā* (not-self) as does Buddhism. According to Buddhism not-self is a natural reality, but most people are deluded. They must come back to the reality. Kant's idea may lead to the problem of, since there is a

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<sup>17</sup> Tipiṭaka: 20/473.

self, how it can be reduced, but the problem is beyond the scope of this article.

An interesting point to be considered in regard to Buddhism and Kant is the role of wisdom in morality. Kant believed that human beings possessed two motivations for deeds, wisdom and impulse, the latter referring to instinct, self interests and character traits created by learning and environmental influences. As long as human beings live under the domination of the impulses they will not conduct themselves according to moral laws, but once they have transcended those impulses they will conduct themselves according to wisdom, which will cause everyone to see harmoniously in regard to right and wrong. There are two motivations in Buddhism also (each of them further divided into three):

Monks, there are three conditions that cause the arising of deeds. Greed is a source of deeds, aversion is a source of deeds, delusion is a source of deeds... There are another three conditions that cause the arising of deeds. Non-greed is a source of deeds, non-aversion is a source of deeds, non-delusion is a source of deeds...<sup>18</sup>

The first kind of motivation is the three roots of unskillfulness. The second kind of motivation is the three roots of skillfulness. The roots of unskillfulness, which are greed, anger and delusion, can be compared with the impulse of Kant. Buddhists call them base human impulses or defilements (*kilesa*). The roots of unskillfulness arise from ignorance (*avijjā*) and clinging to the self. They are the impulses that lack rational reflection. The three roots of skillfulness are wisdom, which Buddhism holds to be an important human potential capable of continuous development to ultimate attainment of *nibbāna*.

The point of difference is that for Kant wisdom is something given to human beings by nature to use for opposing the impulses. Morality is a state of friction between wisdom and the impulses. Moral actions must involve resistance between the two motivations in which wisdom is the winning side. Actions in which there is no resistance between the two motivations have no moral value. For instance, when a man forces himself to help an enemy in distress, this shows that wisdom has successfully resisted the impulses. If he were to act according to his impulses he would

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<sup>18</sup> Tipiṭaka: 20/473.

have left his enemy to be destroyed. His conscience of right and wrong was awakened, causing him to reflect that people should help each other. But suppose there was another person who, be it through natural gift or through training, always helped his fellows, no matter who they were. For him helping an enemy would be a natural action. There would be no resistance between what he should do and what he wanted to do. In this case, Kant would regard the action as having no moral value.<sup>19</sup> It is like rain falling naturally—we need not praise it when it enables us to plant things or damn it when it causes a flood.

In Buddhism, the ideal person, the one who has attained *nibbāna*, has gone beyond resistance between the roots of skillfulness and the roots of unskillfulness. That the roots of unskillfulness do not come to harass him, and the roots of skillfulness are the leaders of his actions, are natural. His liberation is absolute. Phra Rajāvaramunī writes that one who has attained *nibbāna* “has true selflessness of a kind that is a natural product of having destroyed clinging to the self with the wisdom that sees the true nature of things... Since it is a manifestation that arises naturally, he can act selflessly without having to force himself.”<sup>20</sup>

In fact the ideas of Buddhism and Kant may not be as different as they seem to be. Kant may not have believed that his hypothetical person—one who from birth would help all people (even enemies) without having to force himself—could actually exist. Buddhism may not believe that a person could be that way from birth, but it does believe that a person is capable of training himself to a level where he no longer has to force himself, and goodness becomes his very nature. Kant probably believed that among ordinary people there would be none who could go beyond the level of having to resist, because if there were such a person Kant would see him as a loving God.

Kant held this resistance or forcing to be suffering. Nature provides human beings with wisdom as well as the base impulses. For Kant, the fact that nature provided human beings with wisdom shows that nature did

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<sup>19</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (New York: The Little Library of Liberal Arts, 1941), pp. 15–16.

<sup>20</sup> Phra Rājāvaramunī, *Buddhadhamma*, p. 274.

not intend human beings to be happy.<sup>21</sup> Nature wanted human beings to be “moral creatures.” The thing of highest value in life is not happiness, be it physical or mental, but to be a moral creature, to be someone who has a constant sense of right and wrong, good and evil. When people follow the desires of their impulses they are happy, but wisdom is the “spanner in the works” that resists the impulses, and that resistance sometimes causes people to suffer. In real life, a good person need not be happy. For this reason Kant went on to believe that God must exist, and consciousness (soul) must be immortal, because if this were not so the good person and happiness, which should go together, would never meet.

Buddhism states that a good person will experience happiness, here meaning mental happiness. A good person is one who is motivated by wisdom or skillful roots. Such a person will be clear in mind. Buddhism calls the person who conquers craving with wisdom a “self-conqueror.” He is one who has mental happiness, with mind calm and untroubled. Kant goes too far with his idea that resistance is suffering. Conquering one’s own mind leads to a certain kind of mental happiness. Kant also differs in that he views wisdom as a cause for people attaining virtue and morality, which for him are the most excellent things in life, but for Buddhism morality is simply a quality of elementary value. While wisdom can make people moral, it can take people further than that, to another kind of experience called *nibbāna*, which lies beyond the normal capacity of most people but is something that according to Buddhism can be attained.

#### *Buddhism and utilitarianism*

The philosopher who made utilitarianism widely known and influential on ethical thinking was the Englishman John Stuart Mill (1806–1875). His doctrine held that an action was deemed right or wrong on the basis of how many people benefited from it: the more people it benefited, the better. This is called the principle of greatest happiness. The same done in societies of different localities, or different times, or on different occasions, may benefit different numbers of people, or in one situation may lead to happiness but in another lead to suffering. Thus it is possible

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<sup>21</sup> Immanuel Kant, *op. cit.*, pp. 12–13.

that in some situations a certain action may be deemed good, but in others deemed bad, or sometimes very good, sometimes only mildly good, depending on the happiness or suffering it produces. The doctrine of utilitarianism is therefore relativistic: unlike absolutism, which holds that deciding factors are fixed, it holds that good and evil are not fixed because of the fluctuation of determining factors.

Some parts of the Buddhist teachings invite the deduction that Buddhism is relativistic. For example, in helping others or practicing generosity, according to the Buddhist teachings the merit “that arises from giving is of different quantities. For example, if the person giving is moral, but the person receiving is not, there is only a moderate amount of merit. If neither the person giving nor the person receiving are moral, very little merit is gained. If the person giving is not moral but the person receiving is moral there is a moderate amount of merit. If both the person giving and the person receiving are moral there is a great amount of merit, like sowing seeds of good quality on good earth: they will ripen into a good fruit for the sower.”<sup>22</sup> Phra Rājavaramunī explains, with help from the Commentaries, that killing living beings carries different amounts of fault (or wrong) depending on different factors. Killing a working animal carries more fault than killing a vicious beast. To kill an *arahant* carries more fault than to kill an unenlightened being. The more effort expended in the act of killing, the more wrong is incurred. Killing with anger carries more fault than killing out of self defense. Lying carries more or less fault depending on the interests that are damaged by it, and whether it is over a major matter or a minor one. For example, if a thief asks us for our money, and we say we have none, there is only little fault incurred, but if we are a witness who gives false evidence there is much wrong incurred. Sexual violation carries more or less fault depending on the virtue of the person violated.<sup>23</sup>

From the above some people may come to the conclusion that Buddhism is relativistic, believing that good and evil change according to various factors, but ultimately Buddhism is absolutist. Giving to one who

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<sup>22</sup> See Phra Sobhonkhanaphorn, *Answering Questions on Buddhism*, pp. 40–41.

<sup>23</sup> Phra Rājavaramunī, *Buddhadhamma*, p. 773.



is in need is always right; killing is always wrong. Other factors merely make the right or wrong weaker, just as putting a lump of salt in a river does not make the water as salty as putting the same lump into a glass of water, even though salinity does arise in the river. However, whether wrong is great or small is still open to question because we are talking about merit (*puñña*) and demerit (*pāpa*), which are concerns of the wheel of *samsāra*. Getting a lot of merit means being reborn in a very good destination, while gaining a lot of demerit means getting reborn in a very low destination. But in terms of Buddhism's highest destination or standard, giving with a mind that is free of greed, anger and delusion, regardless of the receiver, makes the mind pure, clear, and peaceful, and this must surely be a kind of good.

Mill, one of the most important of the utilitarian thinkers, thought that the mental motivation behind an action is of no consequence in determining the action's goodness or badness. He cited the example of a man who saves another from drowning, whose action is morally right regardless of whether his motivation was an expectation of reward or sheer humanitarianism with no thought of reward. Kant would probably regard helping through expectation of reward as merely an investment void of any moral value. Buddhism would probably agree with Kant more than Mill. Helping to get something in return is certainly not evil, but the action has arisen from an unskillful root, which in this case is the desire to get money. Thus we could not call the action truly good, and it would not have the effect of creating peace and clarity in the mind. Mill held that the deciding factor for whether an action was good or evil was the result it led to, and that result must be visible. Mental motivation is a personal attribute known only to the doer. Looking solely at the visible results of the action can allow us to argue convincingly on good and evil. For Buddhism and Kant results are dependent on the mental motivation, which is the main deciding factor on action, and motivation is something only the doer of the deed can know.

#### *Buddhism and Hobbes*

A comparison of Buddhist ethics with the thought of another philosopher may help us to more clearly understand the Buddhist position. Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) posed the question “Why do we help

another person? Why do we consider the interests of others?" His answer was "for our own interests." He saw that doing things that were beneficial to others was indirectly helping oneself. If we did not help each other society would be in turmoil and we could not be happy, and when we fell on hard times no one would help us. Human beings are dominated by selfish instincts. They have to give a little otherwise they would be forced to give more. People should not be ashamed of being selfish because there is no choice.

Kant would certainly not agree with this answer. His answer was that nature provided mankind with wisdom, not so that people could take advantage of each other, but in order to suppress their instincts and become good, moral people. Wisdom helps people to see that acting according to the moral law (such as by helping one's fellows) is a way of making oneself a true person, one who is above the animals, through morality.

Mill tried to answer this question too. For Mill, the question of why we should bother to help others is an important one, because he felt that good actions were actions that were useful to the majority. He devoted the third chapter of his book *Utilitarianism* to an examination of this question. His answer was that the idea that we should help others is simply a feeling. Within human beings there is a tendency for people to help each other and live together in harmony, sharing each other's joys and tribulations. For people who do not have this feeling education may help to produce it.

Buddhism teaches to give up to others. Ordinary unenlightened beings have different motivations for actions, but "The wise (*pañḍita*) do not give in order to obtain *upadhisukha* (happiness stained with mental defilements), but in order to eliminate defilements."<sup>24</sup> That is, the wise give things and help others in order to purify their minds and so bring them closer to *nibbāna*. There are those who wonder whether this is a kind of selfishness. One Western scholar, for example, felt that for Buddhism killing was wrong not because it entailed destroying another life or creating unrest in society, but because it upset the peace of mind of the

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<sup>24</sup> Tipiṭaka: 29/825.

one who kills.<sup>25</sup> If we consider along these lines we will have to proceed to decide whether it is selfish to give not to help other beings but in order to help one's own mind to be peaceful and pure and lead it to *nibbāna*, which is a personal liberation.

There are passages in the texts which may induce the misunderstanding that Buddhism teaches people to give more weight to their own interests than those of others, but if such passages are read carefully such a misunderstanding will not arise. In the *Dhammapada*, for instance, there is the statement "Do not jeopardize one's own interests for the sake of another."<sup>26</sup> And in the *Anguttara Nikāya* it is said that people in this world can be divided into four groups as follows: (1) Those who practice neither for their own benefit nor the benefit of others. (2) Those who practice not for their own benefit but for the benefit of others. (3) Those who practice for their own benefit but not the benefit of others. (4) Those who practice both for their own benefit and for the benefit of others. It goes on to state that the first group is of least virtue, the fourth group is of greatest virtue, while between the second and third groups, the Buddha regards (3) as better than (2).<sup>27</sup> It seems strange that the Buddha would teach that one who practices for one's own benefit but not for the benefit of others is better than one who practices not for his own benefit but for the benefit of others.

However, if we understand "one's own benefit" and "the benefit of others" in the Buddhist sense we will understand the problem more clearly. There are two kinds of benefit: physical and mental. Things that are of physical benefit are limited in number: one person's gain is another person's loss, or at least an obstruction to his gaining. Things that are of mental benefit are not limited. When one person gains them, others can still gain them, or at least are not obstructed from gaining them.

According to Buddhism, benefit means mental benefit, not physical benefit. The Buddha went on to explain that one who practices for his own benefit but not for the benefit of others is one who practices to eliminate greed, anger and delusion in himself but who does not encourage others to

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<sup>25</sup> Winston King, *In the Hope of Nibbāna*, (La Salle: Open Court, 1964), p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> Tipitaka: 25/22

<sup>27</sup> Tipitaka: 21/95.

do so. One who does not practice for his own benefit but who practices for the benefit of others is one who does not practice to eliminate greed, anger and delusion in his own mind but encourages others to do so.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is not strange that the third kind of person is better than the second kind of person: how can one who does not eliminate his own defilements encourage others to do so?

One who seeks material benefit for himself contributes to other people's loss of material benefit (and perhaps, indirectly, mental benefit too), but one who seeks mental benefit for himself must give up material benefit, so he is contributing to the material benefit of others (and indirectly their mental benefit). Thus there is the fourth kind of person, one who practices for his own benefit and the benefit of others, and Buddhism regards such a person the best of all.

Translated from the Thai version by *Bruce Evans*

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<sup>28</sup> Tipiṭaka: 21/96.