

Consequentialist Approach in Buddhist Ethics

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Abstract

The aim of Buddhist philosophy is liberation of soul. Liberation is perception, peace and self-less drive. Liberation is depended on karmas of that particular person. It is shaped by a person's particular activity towards moral effort and as a result of this he can achieve liberation. Action, force of will, freedom of will and moral effort towards actions are the key concepts in Buddhist theory. Buddha emphasises on the law (Dhamma) which is depended on his first principle 'Theory of Dependent Origination or the 'Theory of Pratityasamutpada'. It is a theory of causality which believes that every effect has a cause. In this context he introduces the wheel of Law (Dharmachakra) which is considered to be irresistible. He believes that the life of man is predetermined; all the consequences he faces are the effect of his previous deeds. It leads his theory to be consequential. This paper is going to discuss whether his theory can regarded be as consequential.

Key words: liberation, karma, predetermined, consequences

Buddha is one of the most prominent spiritual thinker and philosopher and his thoughts are appreciated till date. Buddhist Philosophy is grounded on his teachings. Buddha's philosophy initially developed in South Asia, later it spread throughout Asia. Nowadays Buddhist Philosophy is cultured all over the world. His philosophy includes epistemology, metaphysics as well as ethics. Buddha was primarily a reformer, an ethical teacher. The only moto of his life was how a person lives his life going beyond suffering. His ethical perspective of philosophy has a rich implication in human life.

According to Buddha, laws of karma or action is inviolable in life. According to the laws of karma, every person should get the bear the result of his karma or actions. We should remember here that not all actions of that person will produce immediate results. The result may arise latter. In this case it produces subtle energy that last for a long time. This force is called destiny or 'adrista'. The main purpose of the Buddhist philosophy is to free the soul from all suffering because it will help us to realize the real world and will free the person from rebirth. If we want to achieve the state of liberation, we must refrain from ourselves from all the negative thoughts and actions that create disruption and cause suffering. At the same time, we destroy all our distorted illusions created by our thoughts and emotions. Otherwise, we cannot unveil the true nature of the world. Furthermore, according to Buddha, the person who achieves the goal of freedom by destroying all desires and passions, belongs to a state of bliss enjoys happiness. Buddhist philosophy does not engage with general theoretical principles of ethics such as what is right or what is wrong, etc. rather it is concerned with many specific moral rules and guidelines regarding virtues and vices. It mainly focuses on the consequences of one's own deeds.

Buddhist ethical lineage that survives today can be clustered into three ethnicities: Theravāda Buddhists, Mahāyāna Buddhists and Vajrayāna Buddhists. Theravāda is an early Buddhist school. The word Theravāda means the teachings of the Elders. According to them everything in the world is temporary and momentary. So, belief of permanency in all worldly things is psychological. When a person perfectly understands the real nature of the world through his insight, he reaches the optimum of his life and this state is known as nirvana. According to them only a saint can achieve nirvana or 'arhat'. Theravāda tradition began in India and Srilanka from 3rd century BCE. Later it spread across the Southeast Asian countries such as Thailand, Cambodia, Burma and Laos.

The Sanskrit word Mahāyāna literally means 'maha yana', the great vehicle. The inner meaning of the word is 'the great rescue path or ways'. 'Bodhisattva' is the divine, moral desire of Mahāyāna. According to them, those who achieve nirvana are known as Bodhisattva. They believe that all persons are of 'Buddha Nature', means all have the inherent potential for enlighten. Bodhisattvas are very compassionate in nature and always ready to help others to attain liberation by showing the right path of life. They even choose to delay their own nirvana to assist others who have the potential to become buddhas. The Mahāyāna tradition is very popular and universally accepted worldwide. Though Mahāyāna schools originated in India but afterwards it spread out South Asia to South-East Asia and East Asia. today we find this tradition in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Vietnam.

The goals advocated by Theravāda and Mahāyāna differ one from another both historically and doctrinally. Practitioners of Theravāda believe that the aim of life is to attain Nirvana. They aspire to become saints and their sacred work helps them to avoid reincarnation. Though Theravādis started their lives to attain Nirvana, they wanted to become Buddha. According to them, those who attain "Buddha" is the one and only person who rediscovered the truth of Buddhism after being lost in the world and who taught this truth to others so that they could get benefit from it. According to them "Buddhas" can achieve Nirvana like saints after death. It is believed that becoming a Buddha is a very difficult process, a rigorous path that one has to attain. On the contrary, the Mahāyāna movement began as a group of practitioners in the early period of Buddhism. All serious Mahāyāna followers take Bodhisattva vows, they promise to become Buddhas by helping all beings. Though they believed in the same doctrine and teachings of Buddha and they performed the same rituals as other followers of the different tradition of Buddhism, but they take the different venues of Buddhahood. However, over time, many other differences also emerged. According to them those who have become Buddha after death, continue their cyclic existence by manifesting various forms in various places to continue the work for the benefits of all beings. Their life cycle will continue, until all living beings are liberated. Mahāyāna Buddhism is very much accepted in Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan and also in other countries like Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia etc.

The third tradition of Buddhism is Vajrayāna. Vajrayāna can be considered a branch of Mahāyāna, as it has the same spiritual goals. Followers of Vajrayāna also committed to becoming Buddhas for the benefit of all sentient beings. Their path is known as 'Diamond Path'. Diamond is the hardest substance in the earth. It is hard, unbreakable, glowing and transparent. To become Buddha, we should make our mind like diamond, the mind that should

be free from confusion, doubts and all other evil thoughts. Inner strength and precision are very much required to go through this path. The word 'Vajra' represents the thunder bolt weapon which can easily remove all our ignorance. This is the boosting method which can transform our mind towards liberation. The word 'yana' represents the way or path which we should follow and will take us to the ocean of knowledge. The main differences between Vajrayāna and other forms of Mahāyāna concern ritual techniques, symbolism, and meditation. Vajrayāna practitioners seek to achieve Mahāyāna goals using Tantric means where the practitioners do not observe the world passively, rather, they involved as revered. In this way the bodily energies act as a force to illuminate the person. This form of Buddhism is practiced by Buddhists in the Himalayas and in some areas of Central Asia, especially in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia.

All these three forms of Buddhism believe that the pillar of Buddhist ethics is Pratityasamudpada or Dependent Origination. This view is contained in the Second Noble Truth of Buddhadeva, where he said that everything has a cause and nothing comes out of nothing. Everything is conditional, relative and limited. The primary metaphysical commitment of Buddhist thought is that everything is caused by antecedent and contemporaneous conditions. The existence of everything depends on some conditions. He believes that life is full of misery and pain and this leads him to conclude that suffering being a fact, must have a cause. Life cannot be explained satisfactorily as an accidental existence, rather it must be thought to be the outward expression of internal urge of life impetus.

Buddhism believes in the universal moral laws known as 'Laws of Karma'. It is a specific form of the universal laws of causation. According to this law, all good actions produce good results and bad actions yield to bad results. The present existence of a person is the effect of its past deeds and one's future existence will be the effect of his present deeds. Our future life will be shaped and determined by our present life.

A very common objection against early Buddhist ethics is that as they do not believe in permanent self who will be the bearer of these actions? A question will arise, a person who commits an action in his life will suffer the consequences or someone else will bear that? If they do not believe in free will or responsibility towards actions, how can one be the determinant of their past or future actions? To answer all these questions, we have to look back to the virtue ethics of early Buddhism. Buddhist ethics is very different from the central conception of western ethics. Indian philosophy always tries to entwine their theory with application. In Buddhism the word '*śīla*' most commonly translated as morality of the conduct. The word *śīla* refers to "moral Discipline" and it is the foundation of Buddhist Ethics. It is code of conducts that build harmony and self-restraint which is primarily based on non-violence. It has been described as Virtue¹, Moral Discipline² and precept. Someone has *śīla* when he makes a commitment to follow a certain set of moral rules and one is abiding to follow those rules. *śīla* has two aspects: 'Right Performance' or *Caritta*, and 'Right Avoidance' or *Varitta*. Honouring the precept of the *śīla* is considered as 'Maradana' or great gift to others. This can only be achieved by not harming others.³ In this context they made a distinction between 'Intrinsic Value' and 'Extrinsic value' that is the distinction between what is valuable in itself and what is valuable as means to bring about something else. But no technical terms have been used by Buddhist that correspond to the terms Intrinsic Value and Instrumental Value. Their

ethics has been described in a non-normative way, depending on how a spiritual person can behave⁴.

Buddhist literature always talks about “good”, “bad”, “Right” and “Wrong”. Sanskrit terms *kuśala* and *śubha* means ‘good’ are used for evaluation of our deeds. Buddhist philosophy always tries to establish what should be the right path of our life and motivate to follow moral rules to avoid the karmic consequences of our actions. Consequences of actions are preserved in the various realms of *sanskara* and will be the cause of rebirth. Actions actuated by greed, hatred and mischief will stimulate rebirth in three realms -monsters, humans, and gods. Many sentient beings are imprisoned in this ‘*karmic*’ or action -oriented cycle and wandering from one realm to others. It fosters them to embrace suffering. The status of the human realm is higher than other two realms. It is the only realm where one can attain *Awakening*, which helps him to liberate one from the whole cycle.

The five Precepts and Vows are the two most important systems of moral discipline in Buddhism which provide the way to get rid of sufferings and want to be liberated. The liberation process is not so easy. One should go through the strengthen process. The precepts are assigned for the persons and the vows for the Monks. They speak of five precepts and these are: commitment to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and drunkenness. It excludes all forms of sexual activity and they have to follow monistic etiquette and behaviour. If one follows the five Precepts it would prevent rebirth as a human being and free him from all sufferings. This form of moral discipline helps people to develop self-respect and self-confidence. It prevents the production of harmful actions as well as stops suffering that occur from harmful actions. On the contrary, Vows helps the monastic community to liberate themselves. It also enhances the spiritual spirit of the monks and nuns. Buddhism lay a great stress on meditation as this practice leads toward liberation.

All phenomena of the world are depended on the law of depended origination, which is the acquiescent of laws of karma. The diversity in the world is due to karma. Buddha holds that there is neither creation nor destruction, all are transformation. All physical, mental phenomena is determined by number of conditions. The whole world is a chain of causality, connected series of phenomena. Each and every phenomenon is an effect of other phenomena. According to Buddha, “by karma the world exists, by karma mankind exists; beings are bound by karma as a lynch-pin of a chariot keeps the wheel on.”⁵ This *karmic* law governs all our physical and mental phenomena. It is highest, independent, universal moral causation. This law sometimes viewed as ‘*Dhamma*’ which is applicable to the chain of causation, the wheel of existence, progress of an individual towards enlighten. Buddhist ethics is pluralistic in a meta-ethical sense, which is the unique combination of deontological, consequentialist, and virtue ethical trends that we found specifically in the Pāli Nikāyas. Early Buddhist ethics should be understood in its terms of a normative theory which is different from Western ethical traditions. They believe that our present life is due to the impression of karma of the past life and this will shape our future life. Ignorance and karma go hand by hand. They determine each other in a vicious circle. Buddhist ethics is considered as a form of action-based virtue ethics which leads to complex interpretation of consequentialism and the question has been raised whether this theory can be marked as consequential theory. Let us elaborate on this point. When the theory

is talking about the Laws of Karma it is all about volitional acts. We indeed experience our volitional activities in present life. Though Buddhists believe that character, physical appearance, life expectancy, success and resurrection are to be impacted by our past activities, yet it is not true that everything that we experience is determined by our past lives. These consequences are not be baffled by fatalism. This position is thoroughly rejected by the Pali Nikayas. An action whether it is good or bad does not depend on the goodness of the consequences of the actions rather it depends on the goodness of the motives of the actions. Respect to duties, observing rules and principles, are considered as morally right and having intrinsic value. At the same time verbal actions of a person during communication are equally necessary to assess the goodness of those actions. According to them, there is always room for mitigating the negative consequences. One can always eliminate this dire situation with good actions. Only our past actions cannot control our present lives. Buddhists believe that though there are Laws of Karma, at the same time there is Free Will. Free will can help us to change our fate. If our 'Will' administrate good actions, there is always a possibility to change our destiny. So, this theory does not support a deterministic attitude or consequentialist approach rather it believes that our free will and other mental factors determine the consequences of our lives. Pāli Nikāyas found that the right actions are irreducible to all-encompassing principles or values or criteria of goodness.

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