

Buddhist Ethics and Mental Development

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A society in the current world is changing into an age of information and technology which brings about various material facilities such as updated information, immediate and convenient communication, modern medicine, and so on. For these facilities, if we superficially look them; they are seem to be useful development, but on the other hand, these technologies have created disaster to human being as much as their usefulness, for instance, the convenient road by which we go everywhere quickly, it causes variously industrial factories in which many things are produced, the industrial factories themselves cause a new community, when young people have to abandon their own homeland to go and work in the factories, and they have to live and work together in a such society without moral standard. The new community itself has destroyed the original community in which the family members have ever lived happily together. When the new community of the young people has arisen; if the members of this new community are moral, many problems such as narcotic, abortion, suicide, gambling house, contagious disease, prostitution and many other moral problems do not arise. This material prosperity, of cause, cannot be stopped; otherwise we were out-of-date as same as ancient man. However, the man himself has to know how to live in the new community as well-informed person, and he should know how to utilize the technologies in creative way. So, he should be trained as both the good producer and the good consumer. The man, therefore, should return to morality which has been neglected for long time in order that the morality comes back into the human society as the most venerable Buddhadâsa said “if the morality does not return; the world would be destroyed”. Nowadays, the man is being affected by the material prosperity such as global warming, water pollution, air pollution, and high cost of living because of over material demand and so on.

According to the Buddha’s teachings, man composts of body and mind, so, human body and mind are important equally, but most of people see significance of physicality more than mentality. Actually, the material prosperity is mind-made; mind precedes all things as the Buddha said

“Mind foreruns all mental conditions,
Mind is chief, mind-made are they;
If one speaks or acts with a wicked mind,
Then suffering follows him

Even as the wheel that follows the hoof of the ox”.¹

From the Buddha’s word as mentioned above, to develop the man, we ought to develop the mind; because good and bad actions of the man arise from the mind that is led by intension.

¹ Dhammapada, vol. 1

What is ethics?

Ethics is a science of human behavior that searches for the highest good of the life and a standard criterion of the behavior “What is right? What is wrong? What should be done? And what should not be done?” which is concerning with morality. The ethics is mentioned about the highest goal of the life such as what is the highest value in the life, what is good, what is bad; how is good life, how we can reach the good lives.²

Buddhist ethics³

The important principle of Buddhist ethics is “doing good begets good, doing bad begets bad”. For good and bad are complex, a fool doubts the action and its result that will follow in the track.

However, the good and the bad are difficult to understand, having known, they are difficult for us to follow the good and to abstain from the bad; because there are conditions causing the man to practice or not to practice as his wish.

According to Buddha’s teachings, the Buddha has pointed out that bodily action, verbal action and mental action must not harm to oneself and others, it is called “the good” that is opposite to the bad. This is general principle of Buddhist ethics that there may be many subordinate points to be explained.

The principles of Buddhist ethics as mentioned assumes advantage essentially, that is, seeing the advantage, even oneself and others are troubled is regarded as “the good”, such as parents are troubled to earn money for supporting their children’s education. Parents are troubled for earning money; and their children are troubled for being patient to study, and patients with temptation and entertainment. The troubles of both parents and children will be benefit in the future; therefore, it is called “the good”.

On the other hand, what makes oneself and others happy may not be benefit such as the search of happiness from allurements which leads to ruin is regarded as “the bad”. Considering the high principle of Buddhist ethics, the standard of good and bad is caused by greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha), it is called “the bad”; if it is caused by non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa) and non-delusion (amoha), it is regarded as “the good”.

Greed (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha) are roots of unwholesome; in same way, the roots of wholesome are non-greed (alobha), non-hatred (adosa) and non-delusion (amoha).

Buddhist ethics is classified into three levels as follows:-

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ชำนาญ พาชื้อ, ผศ., เอกสารประกอบการสอนวิชาพุทธปรัชญาเถรวาท ๒, กรุงเทพฯ : มหาวิทยาลัยมหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย, พ.ศ.

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Ibid pp. 6-9

1. Fundamental ethics: it is basic principle regarded as necessary for men to live together in society is five precepts and five ennobling virtues.

1.1 It means five precepts that ordinary people always practice them as the following items:

- (1) to abstain from killing,
- (2) to abstain from stealing,
- (3) to abstain from sexual misconduct,
- (4) to abstain from false d to abstain from speech,
- (5) to abstain from intoxicants.

The five precepts should not be violated, because it is a cause of troubles of oneself and others, if the five precepts are not offended; it is regarded as physical and verbal normality, because it is free from all troubles.

1.2 The five ennobling virtues are gracing virtues as follows:

- (1) loving kindness and compassion,
- (2) right means of livelihood,
- (3) sexual restraint,
- (4) truthfulness,
- (5) mindfulness.

These five are practical that grace the man, the moral man acts rightly in bodily action and verbal action.

2. Middle ethics: it is wholesome cause of action (kusalakammapha) that means a way of good leading to prosperity and peace which promotes the man highly. There are ten kinds of wholesome cause of action:

2.1 Good conduct in act; it means three bodily wholesome acts:

- (1) to abstain from killing,
- (2) to abstain from stealing,
- (3) to abstain from sexual misconduct.

2.2 Good conduct in word; it means four verbal wholesome acts:

- (1) to avoid lying,
- (2) to avoid malicious speech,
- (3) to avoid harsh language,
- (4) to avoid frivolous talk.

2.3 Good conduct in thought; it means three mental wholesome acts:

- (1) to be without covetousness,
- (2) to be free from ill-will,
- (3) to possess right view such as that gifts are fruitful.

The ten wholesome causes of action are called virtues of a gentleman, the virtues of good man.

2. Higher ethics: it is the high ethical behavior that means the Noble eightfold Path purifying the mind of the man who has followed from all kinds of defilement, changes the common man into the noble one.

The Noble eightfold Path:-

1. Right Understanding
2. Right Thought
3. Right Speech

4. Right Action
5. Right Livelihood
6. Right Effort
7. Right Mindfulness
8. Right Concentration.

The Noble Eightfold Path is the only way, even it has many items, but the man has to practice the Noble Eightfold Path simultaneously, as if a rope composes of many twists.

Mental Development

The fundamental Buddhist ethics that are five precepts and five ennobling virtues is important for developing a person as a good ordinary man by following them without any committing an offence of them; therefore, the man is both bodily good and verbal good which is regarded as morality, i.e. right action, right speech and right livelihood as the Buddha said:-⁴

When the Buddha was staying in Pāvā city at mango garden of Cunda, he went and talked to the Buddha that he believes in cleansing himself accordance with regulation of Brahmins who get up early in the morning, take a pot of water, wear a garland, do a sacrifice and take a bath in the Ganges; when these Brahmins get up early in the morning, touch the earth or cow dung or grass by their hands or do the sacrifice or went into the water three time a day.

The Buddha said “the regulation of Brahmins for cleansing themselves is different from regulation of Ariya-discipline, that is, a man does ten unwholesome causes of act which is bodily, verbal and mental impurity; even though a such man gets up early in the morning, touches or does not touch the earth, touches or does not touch the cow dung, does or does not do sacrifice, pays respect or does not pay respect to the sun, he is still an impure man; because ten unwholesome causes of act is both impurity itself and impurity” and further said “the ten wholesome causes of act is the cleanser of body, speech and mind, i.e. right action, right speech and right thought which is to intend to abstain from wrong livelihood, the such man of the ten wholesome causes of act gets up early in the morning; even he touches or does not touch the earth, touches or does not touch the cow dung, does or does not do sacrifice, pays respect or does not pay respect to the sun, he is still a pure man. Because, the ten wholesome causes of act causes him to be cleaned”

To upgrade the mind into higher level of virtue, the man has to have right effort that is human effort, and directed to the principle of Buddhism which is regarded as what is discovered, and disclosed by the Buddha. So, everyone has to endeavor to build the achievement by his own effort as the Buddha said “the attempt belongs to you, the Tathâgata is only a teller.”

⁴ พระธรรมปิฎก(ป.อ. ปยุตฺโต). พุทธธรรม, กรุงเทพฯ: มหาจุฬาลงกรณราชวิทยาลัย, พ.ศ. ๒๕๓๘ หน้า ๓๕๕-๓๖๐

However, to make right effort is the same as practicing other Dhamma that has to be started firstly in the mind. The right effort as mentioned is follows:-⁵

1. The effort to prevent unwholesome roots that do not yet arise not to arise,
2. The effort to overcome the unwholesome roots that have arisen,
3. The effort to develop wholesome roots that do not yet arise to arise,
4. The effort to maintain wholesome roots that have arisen to be last long.

The right effort is an important virtue, because it encourages other Maggas. To emphasize on this virtue should be considered from the Buddha's word "this right effort belongs to diligent man; it is not for an inactive man."

The right effort can be flourished because of relation with outside world that are the objects received through six senses, and these objects are known by the mind; and then like and dislike of the objects arise in order to become intention that come out from the mind to actions in daily life; so, energetic effort and development of internal virtue are effected by the influence of surroundings in the aspect of promotion or obstruction, the effort especially called "Padhâna" that has to relate to bodily, natural and social surroundings. At this point itself, the role and significance of those surroundings are affected to creation of the good life and attainment of highest goal of Buddhism.⁶

Right mindfulness is emphasized on practice of Dhamma; so, way of life with the mindfulness is always called "Appamâda" that is carefulness. This carefulness is way of life with the mindfulness, it reminds always us to remember our duties that have been done, and have not been done yet; as well as helps us to work cautiously. The mindfulness is an important ethics of the general practicing which commences from the level of morality to level of concentration. It is importance for the process of mental work to develop wisdom, in this level of wisdom itself; the mindfulness does its duty completely that is the mindfulness in the four foundations of mindfulness.

A main point of the four foundations of mindfulness is to tell us that we have to live with four foundations of mindfulness, i.e. 1) mindfulness of body 2) mindfulness of feeling 3) mindfulness of mind and 4) mindfulness of mind-objects. If our way of lives is protected by mindfulness, it is leading to realization of the noble truth as far as we can change our behavior into good conduct, and finally be free from all kinds of suffering.

Right concentration is the last item of the eightfold path that is due to the deep training of mind, it is elaborateness both in the aspect of elaborate mind and in the aspect of complicated practice. It is center point of all practices.

The right concentration is stability of mind, one-pointedness of mind; it is used for developing insight wisdom in order to realize things as they really

⁵ Ibid p. 800

⁶ Ibid p.802

are. So, the concentration as mentioned is momentary concentration and access concentration.

The basic element leading to development of concentration is mindfulness, because it is a device for controlling the mind with only one object that is what should be related, or should be done in here and now. Therefore, the mindfulness is a resting place of mind; so, there are two kinds of development of concentration⁷ :-

1. Development of concentration for wisdom by using the mindfulness to control the mind to stay with any object, and then the wisdom will contemplate and realize it.

2. Development of concentration for only concentration by using the mindfulness to control the mind in order that it can stay with only one object stably and constantly to build up only the concentration.

In good way of life of the man, right understanding plays its role as mental action more than bodily action and verbal action, because it is the forerunner to lead a life, a society and mankind to the progress; in the life of the man, it can be seen that view is specification of way of life of man in aspect of both input and output, i.e. how the man will act to the world and his life.

In the practical way, the importance of view can be seen easily such as when the man has a point of view that the material rich is an aim of life. He will search for the material rich, and he will have an opinion that a value of man is the material wealth. Moreover, if he is an unwholesome man, he will look for the rich through both wholesome action and unwholesome action, and in his sight, the wholesome man is a foolish man; merit and evil are only treat, but he will attach to his life, his body, his properties and people around him, and behaves oneself giving an expression of suffering that is in line with the power of attachment or desire. So, wrong view is called wrong understanding, right view is called right understanding. The factors of the right understanding are good surrounding (Paratoghosa) and proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra).

The good surrounding (Paratoghosa) is an outside factor that is connected by faith, or the faith is a persuader that arises from good society; if the society is good, the persuader is also good. This good society will instruct the mind of a man to become meritorious mind; naturally human mind is pure, so, the human mind will be pure or impure, it depends on social surrounding.

The proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra) is an inside factor that is the man himself, when he has stayed within the society, he has to look for the good man so that he can learn good teachings from him, then he can apply his life in order to stay in the society rightly and happily. Therefore, the good life is based on the right understanding.

Generally, a ordinary man, receiving objects through six senses by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking, will feel either good or bad; if it is satisfied, he will like it, if it is unsatisfied, he will dislike it; from this point itself, the various thoughts base on the power of the like and the

⁷ Ibid p. 169

dislike. The like or dislike influences thought of ordinary man; it make him not to see the reality of things because of lacking of the proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra), that is, the ordinary man looks the things superficially by lacking of mindfulness, does not use it to analyze his own thought according to a principle of the proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra). Because of this, a viewpoint of the things arises wrongly, so, wrong view encourages the wrong thought.

On the contrary, to realize the things as they really are; the proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra) must be used, the thought of man will be free from both the like and the dislike; right view and right thought arise, and they encourage each other. The thought of man is clear of the like and the dislike. The thought of the proper consideration (Yonisomanasikâra) is opposite to the mental unwholesome act.

The way of human life is seen in two aspects; one is to struggle for safety of life; and other is to search for happiness. Whatever has been done by both rich man and poor man that there is the happiness behind them. Therefore, what is behind the process of searching for the happiness of man is nothing but desire, the man has to do everything for responding to his desire; when he gets what he wishes, and he is happy and peaceful. His happiness is to have responded to desire. So, the man has to train oneself according to social agreement that a wise man has laid down in order that persons in the society follow, because he believes that the man is good or bad neither by birth, race nor by the family, but by action that is bodily action, verbal action and mental action. For these actions, mind is their chief; they are mind-wrought. If a man acts or speaks or thinks with impure mind, suffering follows him. So, the man should develop his mind with the Buddhist ethics that there are three levels i.e. fundamental ethics, middle ethics and higher ethics as mentioned before. Each level of ethics plays its role for each kind of man. The fundamental ethics is for ordinary man to make him become a good ordinary man. He has to behave oneself away from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech and drinking intoxicants; and he has to follow the five ennobling virtues i.e. loving kindness and compassion, right means of livelihood, sexual restraint, truthfulness, mindfulness.

The Buddhist ethics for developing the man to become a good man which is higher than the good ordinary man is middle ethics that are the ten kinds of wholesome cause of action i.e. three bodily wholesome acts, four verbal wholesome acts and three mental wholesome acts, because, this level of ethics instructs the man to control his mind according to a principle of three mental wholesome acts.

To develop the man to become a noble one is to follow the Noble eightfold path by applying it into threefold training i.e. morality, concentration and wisdom that are the level of highest Buddhist ethics to purify one's mind that is the mental development.
