

Buddhist Ethics for the Modern World

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Introduction

An exploration of the Pali literature shows that in Buddhism there is a universal code of ethics. Unlike theistic religions, where ethics is derived from God, in Buddhism ethics is at first derived from what could be called the “principle of equality,” the fact that all beings fear suffering, that all beings tremble at death. But to follow ethics is required that one has an understanding and realization of another principle: “Comparing oneself with others, one should not harm or cause others to harm.”² Here we can see that while the Buddhist universal code of ethics is based on the principle of equality, its application depends on what could be called “the principle of comparison.” Furthermore, according to Buddhism, although our humanity is granted when we are born as humans, it should be validated on a daily basis by the observance of a universal code of ethics, that is, by not causing suffering to other beings.

All this seems to put Buddhist Ethics on a solid higher ground as a source of reliance and direction for this troubled world. However, this set of ethics was prescribed for a world much simpler and different from the modern world. This set of ethics was prescribed for a world where the individual-to-individual relation was paramount. Nowadays, in the modern world, societies have changed and other kinds of relations have also become important, to wit, individual-to-institution relation, institution-to-individual relation, and institution-to-institution relation. In the modern world individuals are not longer acting as mere individuals but also increasingly as part of institutions. And while we continue to insist that individuals follow the universal code of ethics, the problem arises on how to make institutions abide by the same code of ethics or even make them understand that they are to abide by the same code of ethics of individuals if they are not to cause suffering to others. This is serious and complex issue that deserves an in-depth investigation. Although such an exhaustive study is well beyond the scope of this paper, here I intend to indicate some of the points that would constitute the framework of such study.

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https://docs.google.com/Doc?docid=ah7ht8cdqj64_135mm7cqc&hl=en.

²*Dhammapada* 129, 130. All Pali references are to the Sixth Buddhist Council Edition.

Origin of Ethics

In Western thought, generally speaking, there are three views regarding the origin of ethics: (1) The Divine Command Theory, (2) The Theory of Forms, and (3) The Theory of Cultural Relativism.³

The Divine Command Theory holds that Ethics is derived from God. The Ten Commandments, the foundation of Judaism and Christianity, that according to the Bible were given by God to Moses, are an example of the Divine Command Theory.

The Theory of Forms comes from Plato who asserted that there is a non-material abstract idea which is the absolute standard of morality and ethics.

The Theory of Cultural Relativism holds that ethics is relative, meaning that we should expect different sets of ethical values according to the time and cultural circumstances of a particular society.

Origin of Ethics in Buddhism

In Buddhism ethics at first is derived from what could be called “the principle of equality.” This principle holds that all beings fear suffering.⁴ According to this principle all beings are equal when confronted with suffering in the sense that nobody wants to suffer. According to this principle suffering is the ultimate equalizing parameter of all beings.

Although this principle of equality seems to hold true beyond the realm of cultural ideologies and religious creeds, to follow ethics another principle is required: the principle of comparison. Regarding this second principle the Buddha said: “Comparing oneself with others, one should not harm or cause others to harm.”⁵

To sum up, in the Buddhism there is a universal code of ethics based on the principle of equality which application depends on the principle of comparison.

The principles of equality and comparison correspond to what is called in Pali “*vāritta-sīla*,”⁶ morality or ethics of restraint. These two principles, which are embodied in the Five Precepts, would prevent the suffering caused by human beings to other beings.

Buddhist ethics has also an active principle which corresponds to what is called “*cāritta-sīla*,” morality or ethics of acting or performing. This active principle, which could be called “principle of equilibrium” or “principle of harmony” considers each individual according to her or his social function or role.

In a given society each individual, through the different stages of life, relates to other individuals performing various social roles as a father, son, husband or wife, teacher, employer, employee, etc. When an individual performs properly the corresponding social roles, he or she will be fulfilling the principle of equilibrium towards a more just and harmonious society.

³See *The Buddhist Religion-A Historical Introduction* by Robinson/Johnson. Also see http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/342501/jewish/W and <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-ethics/>.

⁴See *Dhammapada* verses 129 and 130.

⁵See *Dhammapada* verses 129 and 130.

⁶For this and the following “*cāritta-sīla*” see *Visuddhimagga* i 11.

As it has been expounded, Buddhist Ethics consists of two individual principles, a passive principle of avoiding causing suffering to other beings, and an active principle of performing what should be done according to the social role of the individual.

Pre-ethics

While Buddhist Ethics focuses on what an individual should or should not do, in the Cakkavatti Sutta we find the conditions that should exist in a society to foster ethical individuals. These conditions, which are the responsibility of rulers and governments, are protection, dwelling, security, and wealth.⁷ When rulers and governments fail to provide for these basic needs, poverty and insecurity increase. It is said that from these deficiencies, propitious conditions are created for all kinds of ethical transgressions to happen.

In the modern world the lack of these conditions often suggests the callousness of rulers and governments towards their citizens. According to the Cakkavatti Sutta the existence of ethical rulers seems to be the precondition to have ethical citizens. By ethical rulers is meant rulers who would, apart from fulfilling their individual ethical precepts, provide to or create the proper conditions in their country so there is no poverty and insecurity among the citizens. However, from an individual's point of view, independently of the conditions, ethics is always a personal responsibility.

Buddhist Ethics in Antiquity and the Modern World

In the ancient world societies were simpler. Generally speaking, the only institution with which the individual had an accountable relation was the government, which invariably was a monarchy. In the ancient world throughout life the individual mostly had social relations only with other individuals. The individual-to-individual relation was paramount.

As time passed societies became more complex and other kinds of relations also became prominent. In any modern society we can find four kind of relations: (1) individual to individual, (2) individual to institution, (3) institution to individual, and (4) institution to institution. The term "institution" is used here to indicate any kind of organization that operates as a unity to reach a definite goal. Examples of institutions: corporations that operate with the goal to maximize profits, departments of government which have specific functions, non-profit organizations, etc.

Before we pointed out the two individual principles of Buddhist Ethics. Now, in a modern society, these two principles, which, as expounded in the Buddhist Scriptures, should apply to an individual-to-individual relation, should also apply to the other three kinds of relations, individual-to-institution relation, institution-to-individual relation, and institution-to-institution relation.

In the modern world, the individual not only functions as a mere individual but increasingly as a part of institutions. Ethically speaking, in the modern world, a pure individual

⁷See Cakkavatti Sutta § 91. In the modern world health care and education should also be included.

per se is getting harder to find. As Buddhists, while we tend to measure the actions of an individual towards other individuals according to the Five Precepts, how should the actions be measured when she or he is acting as part of an institution? What if the institution for which the individual works is, at any time, breaking any of the Precepts: Will, the individual who works, let us assume, as a secretary, that is, not breaking the Precepts individually, be breaking the Precepts by working for the corporation? Traditionally the answer to this question would be negative if the individual's volition is not unwholesome. But how tenable is this position when nowadays, according to the law in many countries, institutions are considered as individuals?

If institutions are considered as individuals, we should be able to identify the institution's volitions by analyzing its actions just as it is possible to identify an individual's volitions by analyzing his or her actions.

Therefore in the field of ethics regarding institutions there are two aspects to be taken into consideration. The first one has to do with the actions of an institution as a whole. The second aspect refers to an individual's actions within and as part of an institution.

Ethically speaking an individual is not a human being simply because of being born human. An individual needs to validate his or her humanity on a daily basis according to the two principles of ethics. And if institutions are considered as individuals they should also be measured by the same precepts as individuals. Therefore, independently of the type of relation, there should always prevail the two aforementioned principles of not causing suffering to others and performing the prescribed function or social role. Unfortunately that is not the case in the modern world.

The Problem of Ethics in the Modern World

The problem of ethics in the modern world could be summarized in the following list:

1. Individuals, not being aware of the principle of comparison, cause suffering to other beings. Transgression in the individual-to-individual relation. This is the classic case of breaking the Precepts.
2. Individuals transgress in their relation to institutions.
3. Institutions transgress in their relation to the individual, society, and the environment.
4. Institutions transgress in their relation to other institutions.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give examples and dwell further in each of these cases. However, it should be mentioned here that among the four cases, case number 3 -when institutions transgress in their relation to the individual, society, and the environment-, is undoubtedly the most serious and damaging of all. This is the kind of transgression that tends to make life on Earth unsustainable. As history shows transgressions of this kind can go unrectified for a long time and often lead to revolutions and violent revolts. The recent events in the Middle East are just the latest examples of institution-to-individual's (and institution-to-society's) ethical transgressions.

As it was mentioned, individuals in the modern world increasingly act as part of institutions. When the different branches of governments do fail, as it is often the case, to pass and enforce laws to prevent ethical transgressions by institutions, perhaps one solution to this widespread problem would be to work to raise and increase awareness among the individuals that it is because of their individual actions that the institutions can carry on with their goals.

Conceivably a great step towards the fulfillment of the ideals of democracy would be given when the individuals would act ethically both individually and socially when being part of institutions by following the two Buddhist principles aforementioned.

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