

PURIFICATION OF MORALITY IN BUDDHIST ETHICS

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Abstract

In the universe, there are two kinds of subject as mind (nāma) and matter (rūpa) if these are classified in the ultimate reality although there are many kinds of beings in designation such as mankind, animal, tree, stone, etc. And also mind consists of consciousness (citta) and mental factors (cetasikas). Of these, consciousness (citta) is luminous and pure by nature but it is defiled by adventitious defilements (kilesās). Thus the Buddha taught to purify one's mind. The final goal of Buddhists is to liberate from suffering but never will one liberate from suffering without purification. Hence, the path of practice leading to liberation from suffering was revealed in seven stages by the Buddha. It is called Sattavisuddhi (seven stages of purification) in Pāli. These are found in the Rathavinīta sutta of the Majjhima nikāya such as purification of morality, purification of mind, purification of view, etc. Of these, purification of morality is the first stage and also root of all purifications, because, without purification of morality, it is difficult to be purification of mind and so on. Purification of morality implies the purity obtained through abstinence from physical, verbal and mental misconduct as well as from wrong livelihood. It is also a guide to people to become a moral person and to develop a good society. Therefore purification of morality (sīlavisuddhi) is very important in Buddhist ethics.

KEY WORDS: Sīla, Sīlavisuddhi, Citta, Kusala, Akusala, Nibbāna.

Introduction

The Pāli term “sīla” (śrīla in Sanskrit and Hindi) is very famous in ancient Indian scriptures. It is translated morality, virtue and precept into English. It literally means character, conduct, habit or behavior and nature. It is expressed by deeds through body and speech including mind. In the Saṃyutta Nikāya, we can see about sīla is explained as the first stage in the path of the Buddhism. Sīla, thus, is the foundation for further spiritual training. Without it, the spiritual advancement cannot be achieved. In every religion and society, there is moral principles to follow.

As long as we cannot become an Arahanta who attained enlightenment (nibbāna), we have to perform only two actions by body, speech and mind such as kusala kamma (wholesome action) and akusala kamma (unwholesome action). Thus sīla also can be kusala and akusala. We need to understand what kusala and what akusala is. Literally, kusala can be differently rendered as skilful, intelligent, expert; good, right, virtuous, meritorious, beneficial; lucky, happy, healthy and prosperous, as the context demands. Akusala, therefore, can be translated into English as the opposite qualities from kusala such as unskillful, bad, wrong, adhamma and so on. Kusala, in brief, means non-fault or good behavior and good result. Akusala means fault or bad behavior and bad result. Thus the Buddha taught “Not to do evils and cultivate merits”.

Of these, abstaining from evils or cultivation of merits is called kusala sīla and committing evils is called akusala sīla. The Buddha exhorted to observe kusala sīla (good behavior) and to avoid akusala sīla (bad behavior). Sīla is not only abstention from evil but also the performance of wholesomeness through body and speech including mind such as helping others or paying respect to those who deserve respect. In Buddhist ethics, hence, it is very important how to develop good behavior (kusala sīla). Thus this research paper is reference to kusala sīla.

Sīla is regarded as the foundation of Buddhist way of living. It denotes virtuous conduct that keeps our well and benefits one. Primarily, sīla is prohibitory injunction, that is to say, sīla keeps one refrain from killing, stealing, committing adulterer, taking intoxicants. In this way, it keeps one away from doing unwholesome actions. Sīla keeps one from telling lies, setting one against the other, using rough and abusive words, indulging in unbeneficial talk, in this way, sīla prohibits one away from saying evil words. And, in this way, avoiding from covetousness, ill-will, wrong view in accordance with Sucarita dhamma is also called sīla.

Many types of Sīla

There are different types of sīla in Buddhist ethics. First we should understand what sīla is. In the Visuddhimagga, the term sīla is defined as follows: there is virtue as volition (cetanā sīla), virtue as consciousness-concomitant (cetasika sīla), virtue as restrain (saṃvara sīla), and virtue as non-transgression (avītikkama sīla)”. And also the Buddha pointed out in many suttas that there are three kinds of morality (sīla) as follows: profitable morality (kusala sīla), unprofitable morality (akusala sīla) and indeterminate morality

(avyakata sīla – neither kusala nor akusala). Furthermore, sīla with regard to its solemnity is of three kinds: the ordinary morality (sīla), the noble morality (upa sīla) and the ultimate morality (paramatṭha sīla).

The Visuddhimagga has classified kusala sīla (wholesome virtue) in many ways. There are sīlas for monks, nuns, novices and lay people. According to Visuddhimagga, lay people can observe five precepts (pañca sīla). But in Aṭṭhasālinī aṭṭhakathā and many suttas it shown only Ājīvaṭṭhamaka sīla for lay people. And then lay people can also observe eight precepts, nine precepts and ten precepts. Novices have to observe only ten precepts including other tasks as Sekhiya. For monks, it gives the following fourfold classification of purification of morality (pārisuddhi sīla): the restraint of Pātimokkha including 227 rules of discipline (pātimokkha saṁvara sīla), the restraint of the sense faculties (indriya saṁvara sīla), the purity of livelihood (ājīva pārisuddhi sīla), the use of the four requisites of robe, dwelling, food and medicines, that is purified by reflection (paccaya saṁnissita sīla).

Sīla consists of two parts as “veramaṇi and samādiyāmi” in the rules of training – Pāṇātipātā veramaṇi sikkhāpadaṁ samādiyāmi, etc. Veramani means avoiding. It is a part of avoiding from committing that the Buddha prohibited “not to do evils”. Samadiyami means keeping. It is a part of keeping rules of training or fulfilling tasks. These are called kusala sīla. Therefore, these can called vāritta sīla and cāritta sīla. According to Vinaya Piṭaka, we would try to observe these two parts or two kinds of sīla if we want to fulfil purification of morality. Hence, the Buddha said, “Vattaṁ aparipūranto sīlaṁ na paripūrati – if you do not fulfil tasks, you would not practice to become purification of morality”. Therefore the fulfilling of both vāritta sīla and cāritta sīla is called purification of morality (sīlavisuddhi).

Vāritta sīla

Vāritta sīla means avoiding immoral or demeritorious actions that the Buddha prohibited from committing. As above mentioned, precepts governing of prohibition (vāritta sīla) consist of refraining from unwholesome actions as “killing living beings”, etc., in five precepts (pañca sīla), eight precepts (aṭṭha sīla), nine precepts (nava sīla), ten precepts (dasa sīla), eight precepts with livelihood as eighth (ājīvaṭṭhamaka sīla) and pātimokkha sīla for monks.

The Buddha’s teaching that “not to do evils” refers to this vāritta sīla. Thus, in brief, there are only ten unwholesome actions (ducarita) including their entourages (durājīva). Of these, at least, lay people must observe Pañca sīla or Ājīvaṭṭhamaka sīla as sucārta sīla (good conduct) to become a moral person.

Cāritta sīla

Cāritta sīla means keeping up the practice of moral conduct and blameless tasks. It is called keeping or fulfilling. Precepts governing of usage (cāritta sīla) consist of the fulfilling of human principles as “not associate with foolish persons”, etc., in Maṅgala sutta and “parents’ duties”, etc., in Siṅgālovāda sutta. The Buddha’s teaching that “to cultivate merits” refers to this cāritta sīla.

The fulfilling of the precepts such as King’s duties, teacher’s duties, etc., enacted by the Buddha that “This should be practiced” is called cāritta sīla. Every person should obey the moral rules. The Buddha had given for example, ten duties for good government in the Jātaka as follows: (i) Be liberal and avoid selfishness, (ii) Maintain a high moral character, (iii) Be prepared to sacrifice one’s own pleasure for the well-being of the subjects, (iv) Be honest and maintain absolute integrity, (v) Be kind and gentle, (vi) Lead a simple life for the subjects to emulate, (vii) Be free from hatred of any kind, (viii) Exercise non-violence, (ix) Practice patience, and (x) Respect public opinion to promote peace and harmony.

Furthermore there are many duties which human beings must perform according to advice given by the Buddha in Siṅgālovāda sutta. Of these, there are five duties to be performed by teachers in relation to their disciples as follows: (i) They train them in the best discipline, (ii) They impart instruction which is esteemed by them, (iii) They teach them every suitable art and science, (iv) They introduce them to their friends and associates, and (v) They provide for their safety in every quarter.

The duties are cāritta sīla. In our society, everyone ought to do these duties in relation to others. Everyone must follow these rules of duties according to one’s role in society. These are socio-ethical duties. Human beings are morally good if they perform these duties. Thus everyone must fulfil all duties to become a moral person.

Benefits of Sīla

Every cause has its results. Thus there are also five benefits available if one observes the precepts steadfastly and permanently. They are: (i) to gain great wealth in the present life, (ii) to gain great fame and reputation, (iii) to be able to appear with courage and confidence in any public gathering, (iv) to be able to face death with calmness and serenity, and (v) to be reborn at a noble heaven realm or at least in the human world at a higher position.

Conclusion

In Buddhism, sīla is an ageless virtue and fragrant at all times. Ornaments and dresses that one wear, seem pretty and elegant only at the appropriate time and place whereas. Sīla shines at all ages (for lifetime), young or old. Actually, if a person has no sīla (morality), he/she is like a dead person. And then a meditator who wants to attain enlightenment has to ornamental with morality. Thus the Buddha said, “Better than a hundred years in the life of an immoral person who has no control over his senses, is a day in the life of a virtuous person who cultivates Tranquility (samatha) and Insight Development Practice (vipassanā). And sīla is the ornament of the meditator-the very one practicing vipassanā meditation”.

The Visuddhimagga describes first sīla, then the development of concentration (samādhi) and after that the development of right understanding (paññā). However we should note that under sīla he describes not only sīla through physical and vocal actions including mental actions, but also sīla which is purification of citta, sīla which includes Tranquility (samatha) and Insight Development Practice (vipassanā).

The Visuddhimagga quotes the Path of Discrimination, where we read about all the different levels of sīla. Included in sīla are the subduing of the defilements (kilesās) which are the hindrances (nīvaraṇas), the development of concentration and the different stages of jhāna, and also the stages of insight (paññā). Therefore we should make effort to be full of purification of morality which is the very basis of the seven purifications. If so, may we attain magga-phala-ñāṇa in the serial order of stages of seven purifications, and then realize nibbāna, the extinction of all suffering very soon.

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