



ETHICAL TEACHINGS IN BUDDHIST SCHOOLS

¹**Ven. TILAWKATHARA**

*Ph. D. Research Scholar, Dept. of Buddhist studies,
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut*

²**Dr. ANOMA SAKHARE (D.Litt.),**

*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Buddhist studies,
Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut*

ABSTRACT

Many Buddhist schools flourished during the pre-*Mahāyāna* period. The only one of these schools that has survived to this day is *Theravāda* School. Traditionally the number of pre-Mahayanic schools is claimed to be eighteen although we know that more than this was probably around twenty-five. *Theravāda* literally means 'teaching of the elders'. The word *Mahāyāna* literally means great vehicle. It is a path available only for monks and ascetics to people from all walks of life. Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, sometimes called *Vajrayāna* (the vehicle of Vajra), in India dates back to around 500 - 400 CE. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes described as presenting a shortcut to enlightenment. Buddhist ethics, which are foundational across various Buddhist traditions, are guided by key principles aimed at reducing suffering and promoting well-being. Some of the core ethical principles in Buddhism include: The Five Precepts, Compassion, Generosity and others.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist Ethics, Buddhist schools, *Theravāda* Buddhism, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayāna*, Pāli Canon.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism is a major global religion for about 300 million people around the world with a complex history and system of beliefs. Throughout approximately 2.5 millennia of history, Buddhism has shown itself to be flexible in its approach to different circumstances and local views while maintaining its core teachings. Buddhism differs from many other faith traditions in that it does not focus on the relationship between humans and a higher deity.

Today, Buddhism affects these areas outside Asia, as well. Buddhism practiced in the north is mostly Tibetan Buddhism, similar to the form practiced in Tibet, and the Buddhism practiced in the south is *Theravāda* Buddhism, practiced in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. Buddhism is also widely prevalent in the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom. The history of Buddhism is characterized by the development of many movements, scholars, and *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions among them, with traditions contrary to the period of expansion and retreat.¹ Among these, the ethics is the core of Buddhism.

DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF BUDDHISM

Organizational structure and specialization integrated by different monastic groups in different sections of Buddhist scriptures, geographical separation, language differences, doctrinal disagreements, selective patronage, influence of non-Buddhist schools, loyalty to specific teachers, absence of a recognized overall authority or different sections of Buddhist scriptures Here are some examples of factors that contributed to communal fragmentation.

THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

Many Buddhist schools flourished during the pre-*Mahāyāna* period. The only one of these schools that has survived to this day is *Theravāda* School. Traditionally the number of pre-Mahayanic schools is claimed to be eighteen although we know that more than this was probably around twenty-five. *Theravāda* literally means ‘teaching of the elders’.² *Theravāda* Buddhism is the predominant form of Buddhism in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. Historically it was also important in South India and had a wide presence in South and Southeast Asia including Indonesia. Its origins can be traced to the 3rd century BC and it originates from a Buddhist school no longer named Pṛthivīvada.

The *Theravāda* tradition claims that a group of Buddhist missionaries inspired by Emperor Aśoka started the *Sthaviravāda* School in Sri Lanka in around 240 BCE. *Theravāda* Buddhism does not believe in contemporary Buddhas.³ Instead, it only accepts Buddha and Gautama Buddha. Unlike some forms of Buddhism, *Theravāda* Buddhism focuses almost entirely on the elimination of all defects in one life. A man who is trying to do so will try to eliminate ‘all the evil that is good and to purify the mind’ through all three trainings. The three trainings are Ethical Practices, Meditation and Development of Insight-Knowledge.⁴

According to *Theravāda* Buddhism all worldly phenomena share three main characteristics. Everything is inconsistent, unsatisfactory and lacks any type of unique element related to that event alone. Out of these three characteristics arises the idea that everything has specific characteristics none of which can be referred to as itself. In *Theravāda* Buddhism, the cause of human existence and suffering is identified as craving, which carries with it the various defilements. Understanding such thoughts will relieve a person

¹ Dr. Jain Bhagchandra ‘Bhaskar’, *Pali bhasha aur sahitya ka Itihaas*, p. 395

² Singh Raman, Haldhar Siya Mishra, *Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan*, p. 27

³ Prof. Dr. Jain Bhagchandra, *Pali bhasha aur Sahitya ka Itihaas*, p. 163

⁴ Prof. Dr. Jain Bhagchandra, *Pali bhasha aur Sahitya ka Itihaas*, p. 164

from ignorance and attain a higher level of awareness and ultimately *Nibbāna*. *Nibbāna* is the ultimate goal of Theravādins.⁵

MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

The word *Mahāyāna* literally means great vehicle. It is a path available only for monks and ascetics to people from all walks of life. Its origins can probably be found in northern India and Kashmir in about 100 BCE and then spread to some areas of Central Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia in the east. The term *Mahāyāna* was originally used by only a small movement in opposition to the formal scholarly approach to Buddhist practice.⁶ Its early period is not entirely clear and equally vague when this *Mahāyāna* label was actually used outside of the texts to designate this self-conscious, independent Buddhist movement. It can be said with certainty that embedded Buddhist schools in China, Korea, Tibet and Japan belong to the *Mahāyāna* tradition. *Mahāyāna* practice is based on Tibetan and Chinese canons.

The Pāli Canon, following *Theravāda* Buddhism, stated that to include only the actual teachings of the Buddha, the texts in the Chinese and Tibetan *Mahāyāna* contain texts that conform to many of the Pali canons, but also contain many sutras and commentaries includes those who are strictly *Mahāyāna*. These additional formulas are not considered valid in *Theravāda*. These include highly regarded formulas like the Lotus and *Prajñāpāramita* Sutras.⁷ *Mahāyāna* Buddhism uses Sanskrit instead of the Pāli form of common words, for example Sutra instead of Sutta Dharma instead of Dhamma.

It is challenging for scholars to present a common feature of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. The reason for this is that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is not a thing, rather it seems to be a mixture of Buddhist philosophy with it sometimes being overlapping and contradictory.⁸ Even in part, scholars no longer accept the traditional account of *Mahāyāna* history. *Mahāyāna* development was presented as a fairly straightforward series of events. It was believed that the teachings of the Buddha were originally organized, communicated and more or less developed into what was called early Buddhism. This early Buddhism was called *Hīnayāna*, *Theravāda* or simply 'Monastic Buddhism'. Around the beginning of the Common Era, a *Mahāyāna* historical account stated that this early form of Buddhism was after the *Mahāyāna* tradition which was considered a major break in the development of Buddhism.⁹

VAJRAYĀNA OR TANTRIC BUDDHISM

Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, sometimes called *Vajrayāna* (the vehicle of Vajra), in India dates back to around 500–400 CE. The origins of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, a Tantric Buddhism can be traced back to ancient Hindu and Vedic practices,¹⁰ including esoteric ritual texts designed to achieve physical, mental, and spiritual success. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes described as presenting a shortcut to enlightenment.

⁵ Singh Raman, Haldhar Siya Mishra, *Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan*, p. 19

⁶ Prof. Dr. Jain Bhagchandra, *Pali bhasha aur Sahitya ka Itihaas*, p. 172

⁷ www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net

⁸ Prof. Dr. Jain Bhagchandra, *Pali bhasha aur Sahitya ka Itihaas*, p. 173

⁹ Ibid. p. 172

¹⁰ Singh Raman, Haldhar Siya Mishra, *Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan*, p. 20

Because some practices had overturned mainstream Buddhism and Hinduism, which were otherwise thought to be entangled in the work, as its practitioners were undercover. The initiative worked closely with a spiritual guide or guru.

Vajrayāna Buddhism is most commonly identified with Tibetan Buddhism, but it also influenced Southeast Asia and parts of East Asia. Buddhism reached a widespread culmination in the Pala period in eastern India for more than a millennium in India. 1100 BC Till, Buddhism had declined mainly as a result of Muslim incursions. However, before this time, Buddhist doctrine was transmitted to Sri Lanka, which became another point of reference for the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

This school believes that traditional methods require many lifetimes to acquire knowledge over very long periods of time, while the methods used in *Vajrayāna* can provide the same results in only one lifetime. *Vajrayāna* has four schools:¹¹

- **NYINGMA:** This school deals with the purification of body, word, mind and promoting absolute truth.
- **KAGYU:** This school promotes all ideological expansion, simplification of the event and movement of the path.
- **SAKYA:** It is based on the ‘way’ of Lamdré teaching or fruit. The main religion system of the school is the ‘path’ with its consequences.
- **GELUG:** It is one of the main schools of Buddhism in Tibet and belongs to the Dalai Lama. Sometimes, it is included in the *Mahāyāna* branch because it shares some sutras with it.

While *Vajrayāna* Buddhism is a part of Tibetan Buddhism, as it is a core part of each major Tibetan Buddhist school, it is not the same with it. The *Vajrayāna* technique adds skilled means to advanced *Mahāyāna* teachings for advanced students.¹² The ‘efficient means’ of *Vajrayāna* in Tibetan Buddhism refers to the Tantra techniques of Tantra (Maha-Ati) and Mahāmudrā (Chagchen).¹³

ETHICS IN THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM

In *Theravāda* Buddhism, ethics play a central role and are guided by a set of principles known as the Five Precepts.¹⁴ These precepts are:

- ♦ Avoid killing or harming living beings.
- ♦ Avoid stealing or taking what is not given.
- ♦ Avoid engaging in sexual misconduct.
- ♦ Avoid false speech or lying.
- ♦ Avoid the consumption of intoxicants that cloud the mind.

¹¹ www.resources.tsemulku.com/overview

¹² Dr. Sakhare Malti, *Understanding Dhamma*, p. 19

¹³ www.dhammadownload.com/index

¹⁴ Dr. Sakhare Anoma, *Essence of Buddhist Philosophical Teachings*, p. 54

Adhering to these precepts is seen as a fundamental aspect of leading a moral and ethical life. Additionally, there are other virtues emphasized, such as compassion, loving-kindness, and generosity. The ultimate goal is to attain enlightenment and liberation from suffering, which is facilitated by leading a virtuous and ethical life. Monastic ethics in *Theravāda* Buddhism are more detailed and rigorous, with monks and nuns following the Vinaya, a set of rules and guidelines governing their conduct.¹⁵ Ethical behavior in *Theravāda* Buddhism is not just about personal conduct but also extends to the intention and mindset behind one's actions. Practitioners are encouraged to cultivate a pure and compassionate heart, which is seen as crucial in the pursuit of spiritual development and liberation from the cycle of suffering.

ETHICS IN MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM

Ethics in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism are rooted in the principles of compassion and the aspiration to attain enlightenment not only for oneself but also for the benefit of all sentient beings. Key ethical guidelines in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism include:

Bodhisattva Vow: *Mahāyāna* Buddhists take the Bodhisattva vow, committing to work tirelessly for the liberation and well-being of all beings. This vow emphasizes selflessness and altruism.

Compassion (*Karuna*): Compassion is a central ethical virtue. Practitioners are encouraged to develop deep compassion for all sentient beings, feeling their suffering and striving to alleviate it.

Wisdom (*Prajna*): Wisdom is another essential aspect of *Mahāyāna* ethics. It involves understanding the nature of reality and the interdependence of all things. This wisdom leads to compassionate actions.

Non-violence (*Ahimsa*): *Mahāyāna* Buddhism promotes non-harming and non-violence towards all beings. This includes refraining from killing, harming, or causing suffering.

Generosity (*Dāna*): Generosity is encouraged as a way to develop the virtue of giving without attachment. *Mahāyāna* Buddhists practice generosity to help others and reduce attachment to material possessions.

Ethical Precepts: *Mahāyāna* Buddhism generally upholds the Five Precepts (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicants) and may add additional vows to cultivate the Bodhisattva path.

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is essential in *Mahāyāna* ethics, as it helps individuals become aware of their actions, thoughts, and intentions, enabling them to act in ways that are in line with their ethical principles.

Patience (*Kshanti*): Practicing patience and forbearance is highly regarded in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, especially when faced with difficulties and conflicts.

Equanimity: *Mahāyāna* Buddhists seek to maintain equanimity, treating all beings with the same care and concern, regardless of their status or relationship to the practitioner.

Altruistic Acts: Engaging in selfless acts of service, charity, and kindness are seen as ethical expressions of one's commitment to helping others attain liberation.

In *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, ethics are inseparable from the path to enlightenment. The ultimate goal is to become a Bodhisattva, someone who aspires to Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

¹⁵ Dr. Sakhare Anoma, *Essence of Buddhist Philosophical Teachings*, p. 34

This ethical framework promotes compassion, wisdom, and altruism as the guiding principles of one's life and spiritual journey.

ETHICS IN VAJRAYĀNA BUDDHISM

Vajrayāna Buddhism, a branch of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism practiced primarily in Tibetan and Himalayan regions, also places a strong emphasis on ethics as part of its spiritual path.¹⁶ While the core ethical principles align with those of other Buddhist traditions, *Vajrayāna* Buddhism has some unique features:

Bodhisattva Vow: Practitioners often take the Bodhisattva vow, committing to work for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. This vow emphasizes compassion and altruism as fundamental ethical values.

Tantric Practices: *Vajrayāna* includes tantric practices, which involve rituals, visualizations, and the use of symbolism. Ethical conduct in tantric practices is crucial, as the power of these practices can be harnessed for both positive and negative purposes. Therefore, ethical behavior is particularly emphasized in *Vajrayāna*.

Guru-Disciple Relationship: The guru (spiritual teacher) plays a central role in *Vajrayāna*. The ethical conduct of both the guru and the disciple is critical. Trust, devotion, and ethical behavior within this relationship are essential for the spiritual progress of the practitioner.

Skillful Means: *Vajrayāna* emphasizes skillful means (*upāya*) in achieving enlightenment. This means that practitioners may engage in unconventional practices, but these must always be guided by wisdom and compassion.

Secret Teachings: Some *Vajrayāna* teachings are considered secret or esoteric, and ethical conduct includes maintaining the secrecy and not using these teachings for personal gain or harm.

Overall, *Vajrayāna* Buddhism's ethical framework is deeply rooted in the principles of compassion, wisdom, and skillful means, with a focus on the Bodhisattva ideal and a commitment to using one's spiritual practices for the benefit of all beings. The guru-disciple relationship and the responsible use of tantric practices make ethical conduct a central component of *Vajrayāna* practice.

CONCLUSION

It is quite likely that these accounts are not factually true but what seems clear is that the element of discontent existed in the Buddhist community from a very early stage. It is known to ensure that after centuries of Buddha, those who followed his teachings for many centuries formed communities settled in different places. Development and geographic spread led to inevitable changes in both their methods of teaching and practices. As the number of members grew, the institutional organization expanded its complexity monks and expanded both theory and disciplinary codes, creating new text styles, developing new forms of subjects and eventually dividing into a number of different schools was done. Thus, Many Buddhist schools flourished during the pre-*Mahāyāna* period. The only one of these schools that has survived to this day is *Theravāda* School. *Mahāyāna* is a path available only for monks and ascetics to

¹⁶ Dr. Sakhare Anoma, *Essence of Buddhist Philosophical Teachings*, p. 75

people from all walks of life. Tantric Buddhism is sometimes described as presenting a shortcut to enlightenment.

Despite not developing a missionary movement, the teachings of the Buddha have been in place for centuries. First reaches Southeast Asia, then from Central Asia to China and the rest reaches East Asia and finally Tibet and further to Central Asia. Often it developed organically in these areas due to local interest in Buddhist beliefs of foreign merchants. Sometimes the rulers adopted Buddhism to help bring morality to their people but no one was forced to convert. The teachings of the Buddha spread peacefully across the Indian subcontinent and to far-flung areas throughout Asia. Buddhism never developed a holistic hierarchy of supreme authority religious authority. Instead each country in which it has developed it's own religious structure and its own spiritual head.

Buddhist ethics, which are foundational across various Buddhist traditions, are guided by key principles aimed at reducing suffering and promoting well-being. Some of the core ethical principles in Buddhism include:

The Five Precepts: These are fundamental guidelines for moral conduct that apply to all Buddhists. They are:

- a. Avoid killing or harming living beings.
- b. Avoid stealing or taking what is not given.
- c. Avoid engaging in sexual misconduct.
- d. Avoid false speech or lying.
- e. Avoid the consumption of intoxicants that cloud the mind.

Compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*) are considered essential virtues. Practitioners are encouraged to cultivate a deep sense of empathy, care, and benevolence toward all beings. Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood are part of the Noble Eightfold Path, which is a central teaching in Buddhism. Right Action, Right Speech, and Right Livelihood emphasize ethical behavior, truthful communication, and engaging in occupations that do not harm others. Buddhism stresses the principle of non-harming, or non-violence, toward all sentient beings. This extends beyond physical harm to include mental and emotional harm. While not all Buddhists become monks or nuns, renunciation of worldly attachments and desires is encouraged as a means of reducing suffering and attaining spiritual growth. Giving without attachment to material possessions is considered a virtuous act that purifies the mind and promotes well-being for both the giver and the receiver. Being mindful of ones thoughts, words, and actions is essential in practicing ethical behavior. It helps individuals become more aware of the consequences of their choices. The concept of karma, the law of cause and effect, reinforces the idea that one's actions have consequences. Good actions lead to positive outcomes, while negative actions result in suffering.

Buddhist ethics are not based on a strict set of rules but on an understanding of the fundamental principles of compassion, wisdom, and the interconnectedness of all beings. Ethical behavior is seen as integral to the path toward liberation from suffering and the attainment of enlightenment. While the

specifics of ethical guidelines may vary among Buddhist traditions, these foundational principles are widely shared.

REFERENCES:

1. Dr. Bhattacharya Bela, *Facets of Early Buddhism: A Study of Fundamental Principles*, Maha Bodhi Book Agency, Kolkata, 2012
2. Dr. Jain Bhagchandra 'Bhaskar', *Pali bhasha aur sahitya ka Itihaas*, Alok Prakshan, Nagpur, 2012
3. Dr. Sakhare Malti, *Understanding Dhamma*, Sanket Prakashan, Nagpur, 2017
4. Dr. Sakhare Anoma, *Essence of Buddhist Philosophical Teachings*, Alok Prakashan, Nagpur, 2023
5. Reade Winwood, *Religion in History*, The Macmillan Company of India ltd., Indian Secular Society, Bombay, 1972
6. Singh Raman, Haldhar Siya Mishra, *Mahayana Buddhism in Bhutan*, Centrum Press, New Delhi, 2012
7. Weber Max, *The Religion Of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 2000
8. Williams Paul, *Mahayana Buddhism- The Doctrinal Foundations* (Edition II), Taylor and Francis, New York, 2009
9. www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net
10. www.resources.tsemtulku.com/overview
11. www.dhammadownload.com/index