

A Study Of Moral Attitudes In Theravāda Buddhism

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Abstract

It is an article to really support as an assignment for my present research work. The Buddha's first sermon after his enlightenment reveals the problem, i.e. there is no mention of *metta* (loving-kindness) and *karunā* (compassion) etc. in the first sermon, but only of self-cultivation to end one's own suffering. Actually, the majority of the enlightened may choose for a moral way of life, however, the logical significance of the opportunity not to do so, cannot deny. Likewise, the majority of the unenlightened Buddhists may be warm and giving, but the only doctrinal reason for being so is self-service.

Whatever, even though the moral attitudes – like certain loving-kindness, compassion, and so forth, and other regarding moral actions – like refraining from killing and so on, did not include in the first sermon of the Buddha, we cannot deny that it, in reality, assist to be a good person or virtue as a moral action (*kusala kamma*) in accordance with *Theravāda* Buddhism. Therefore, this article attempts to combine not only the factors as mentioned above but also the monkish regulation for monks and nun who are the enlightened and unenlightened.

Keywords: *Moral Attitude, Regulation, the Enlightened Buddhists, Theravāda Buddhism, Nibbāna.*

Introduction

The five self-restraints (*sīla*) and giving (*dāna*) are the first two of a standardized list in *Theravāda* morals of ten virtues to be cultivated by habitual action, the others being renunciation, insight, exertion, patience, truthfulness, persistence, friendliness, and even-mindedness. There are other lists of skillful actions (*kusala-kamma*) related to morality, but the role of self-development is prominent in all. The *Jātaka* Tales illustrate the virtues in action. But meditation is also a virtue, as can be seen by looking at the practice of the four “moral attitudes” (like *brahmavihāras*, “di-vine abodes”): loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and even mindedness (*upekkhā*), and other-regarding actions.

Each attitude is radiated outward in all directions to all sentient beings. They are not part of the eightfold path. However, for those on the path the practitioner's own mental cultivation, not the effect on others, is once again the center of attention. These practices break down a meditator's sense of separation from other beings, but the purpose for doing so is no other-regarding — e.g., compassion toward all beings lessens a sense of self and thus calms the practitioner's own mind. Then, we can say that the compassion is a very essential moral attitude for practitioner. The expressed objective of these exercises is to overcome the

practitioner's particular untoward mental states: friendliness is to be practiced by the ill-willed, compassion by those with evil or immoral thoughts, sympathetic joy by those who are jealous of others and even-mindedness by those who lust. That is, the purpose for these exercises is conquering certain unwholesome states of mind and replacing them with ones that lead the practitioner toward *Nibbāna*.

But sympathy and other such attitudes are not actions, and other-regarding actions are necessary to be moral. These exercises are not even preparation for other-regarding acts. In the words of Harvey Aronson, in the Buddha's discourses "compassion is never described or prescribed as the motive for social activity." As he says, each practice consists of wishes rather than any necessary commitment to actual action. There is no impulse to actual moral action. Once again, the concern is the inner development of people. Cultivating such positive attitudes is an "action" under the *Theravāda* worldview (since all thoughts are actions with kammic effects) but one that only benefits the practitioner. The exercise of compassion consists only of wishing that others be free from suffering; friendliness is merely wishing, "May all beings be happy"; and sympathetic joy is merely taking joy in others' success. But mere identification with the suffering of another is not moral action.

Thinking, "We should help the homeless," is not action to help them and thus is not moral action. Even-mindedness is the "complete evenness of mind in perceiving others' happiness or suffering." Such an attitude toward criminals and their victims may help the practitioner, but it may well lead to apathy. As Bhikkhu Bodhi said of the moral attitudes in general, "on reaching its perfection the social attitude . . . seems to become distinctly a social."

These attitudes extend the positive feelings that meditators have toward themselves and people close to them to all sentient beings. For example, one begins by directing the same compassion a mother has for her only child first toward oneself and slowly expands until it embraces all beings. However, the practice is impersonal: "these seemingly ethical and personal attitudes, in the process of their universalization, have almost totally lost their ethical-personal quality."

The practices are merely a matter of attitudes, and "persons" are reduced to objects toward which no moral action is exhibited. Thus, these attitudes, as meditative practices, do not contribute to a general cultural atmosphere of concern for others that is ultimately expressed in moral action. Indeed, we who considers these attitudes moral (without discussing the concept), have to admit that the objects of the moral attitudes are not affected but the mind of the meditator is necessarily protected from anger, cruelty, and displeasure toward others.

The practitioner, as with the other *Theravāda* practices, is the only beneficiary *Theravāda* Buddhism of concern here. These practices weaken the meditator's entrenched and mistaken view of distinct beings that should be valued differently, and more generally of the values of "better" and "worse." Since these meditative practices work inwardly on our dispositions, it is natural to suppose that they will be expressed in actions outside of meditation in right action.

The Monkish Regulation

The regulation of monks and nuns has an ample opportunity to help the laity. It is in constant contact with society at large (although some monks are more forest dwelling ascetics). The regulation, along with the Buddha and the doctrine, is a refuge for the lay community. Indeed, the purpose of the regulation is often said to be to advance the happiness of all beings. And the monastics do fulfill a vital role for the lay community: passively as the most effective field of merit (*puññakkhetta*) and the exemplars of both proper conduct and the satisfaction of the monk-ish life, and actively as preaching and teaching, and as “spiritual friends” (*kalyānamittas*).

In point of fact, teaching and preaching, being a spiritual friend, and preserving the teaching are the most fundamental aid to any person, since ultimately each person must accomplish the end of suffering for himself or herself — you must strive yourself; the enlightened only point the way. Thus, within this framework of factual beliefs, instructing others is the highest manifestation of other-regardingness. Conversely, the kammically worst actions (along with killing one’s parents) are any actions that hurt the propagation of the teaching, i.e., killing an enlightened person, even hurting a Buddha, and causing a schism in the regulation.

The order also involves the practice of giving: the monastics give both their presence to receive gifts and the Buddha’s teachings — the greatest gift possible, since it leads to the end of suffering — in the reciprocal relation with the laity, who gives food to begging monks and nuns and material to the monasteries. In some cases, the monasteries are quite luxurious, hence, the paradox of renouncers are living in luxury.

Throughout the regulation’s history, monastics have also performed nonreligious functions for the laity — i.e., services not closely related to leading the laity toward *Nibbāna* (Bliss) — often in direct conflict with the precepts of the monastic code governing their conduct. It is not recommended that they engage in this worldly good works — even an occupation as morally commendable (from our point of view) as being a doctor — because such deeds may become objects of attachment. These actions may kammically damage the impinged-upon parties by making them more comfortable in the realm of nescience, thereby rendering them less inclined to take up the religious quest. And since the actions are done by the unenlightened, they may not be effective and only hurt the actor. At best, these acts do no harm and no (real) good. It can be argued that the monks and nuns should not teach until they are enlightened, since one cannot pull another person out of the mud until one has first pulled oneself out.

But in practice, unenlightened monks teach the doctrine since the order in general is commended to advise the laity against doing “unwholesome” courses of action, to exhort them to do the propitious, to cultivate the moral attitudes, to deal with the laity’s misunderstandings, and to show the laity the way to the heavens. But only the enlightened Buddhists have the proper worldview and dispositions that enable them to help others without attachment. If persons along the path have the desire to teach, their concern is misguided at least insofar as it is directed toward an inappropriate object since there is no real “being.” Teaching could, therefore, be detrimental kammically to themselves and misleading to others in the guidance given. Only the

enlightened have, totally, replaced mistaken views and selfish ends with good benevolence and compassion, enabling them to help without any consequences for themselves and others.

Enlightenment also enhances the monks' and nuns' merit-value for the giving by the laity. Thus, it is often argued that gaining enlightenment first is of supreme benefit to others, and therefore the monks and nuns should focus on their own development. On the path, they are to be "islands to themselves, their own resort" for their own development. Not all monastics are seriously on the quest for *Nibbāna*, but for those who are the quest only exacerbate the moral problem. Ironically, the intense quest for freedom from a sense of self heightens the self-centeredness of the person on the quest.

An illustration of the central concern is the disturbing story of a precept of the Buddha frequently cited as evidence of moral concern: "Whoever wishes to care for me, let him look after the sick ones". This precept was spoken to the monks in response to their actions toward some monks. The latter monks were sick and had been ignored, being left to lie in their own filth in their cells. In one instance, a monk's condition became so bad that the monks carried him out of the monastery and dumped him by the side of the road.

The Buddha had to institute the special rule to alter this appalling lack of caring by the monks for their fellow monks. It was ad hoc, not following from their basic Buddhist values and goals. The problem was that each monk's concern extended only to himself and to the Buddha (whose teaching was of direct importance to himself) but no further — the sick monks were of no value to the other monks and thus of no concern. Their actions toward the sick monks must be considered immoral.

(One can argue that dumping the sick monk on the road was actually helping him because he then could be picked up by others and might receive medical attention. But if that is so, then the monks should have placed all the sick monks outside the monastery. Either way, some of their conduct was not moral in situations where morality would require other regarding action.) They literally stepped over the sick to get to what they valued.

Nibbāna (Bliss) and Sīla (Morality)

However, the moral status of enlightened Buddhists' actions may fare differently. In the enlightened state, they have reached a state of mindfulness in which they move free of projecting our linguistic concepts unto reality, and thus they no longer create an artificial world of distinct entities. Thereby, all nonexistent "realities" to which they could become attached have dis-appeared, and the sensory world remains "as it really is" (*yathābhutam*). The enlightened are freed from a sense of "I" and all the motives of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) accompanying it. All greed and hatred are ended, since these motives rest upon the delusion that there is a distinct self whose interests take priority; and with all attachments ended, suffering ends. Just as the enlightened eat whatever is offered in their begging bowls, not judging its worth or taste, so too do they accept all experiences.

The person who attained to the *Nibbāna* seeks nothing and thus is free. One is permanently in a state of calm even mindedness, both concerning whatever happens to oneself and in seeing all beings impartially. Is there anything about such a state of a person that rules it out as being moral? A few objections can be dismissed

easily. First, it is often objected that the mystical point of view is monkish and therefore there is no room for moral reflection.

It is true that during the trances (*jhānas*) that prepare the mind for the enlightenment insight there is no mental space differentiating oneself from other realities, and thus there is no mental space available for moral or any other type of reflection. But the enlightenment-experience in Buddhism is not of that nature: it is a mindful-insight into the nature of reality made while the mind's sensory and conceptual activity is occurring. In the subsequent enlightened state, reflection and the consideration of alternatives are possible. The Buddha's ability to use language is evidence of this.

Also, his ability to adjust his teachings according to the capacity of his listeners entails that he was not an automatic machine spewing out at random words and phrases memorized before his enlightenment. This means there is also the mental space necessary for moral reflection. A second objection is that the enlightened are "beyond good and evil" and thus not interested in the welfare of others. An enlightened Buddhist is beyond the sanction of kamma, freed from merit and demerit. The enlightened can, without any kammic repercussions, do any deed that for the unenlightened would produce the merit or demerit that perpetuates rebirths — their acts are neither "black" nor "white", i.e., free of karmic bad or good fruit.

Therefore, they can undertake any action. No course of action is binding. No act is bad per se — only the motivations for doing it are good or bad. And the personal intention (*cetanā*) that is kamma has been replaced with even-mindedness. This can lead to indifference to others. The enlightened have internalized a perspective from which deeds motivated by personal concerns are impossible — i.e., they do not have the factual beliefs permitting an evil (selfish) act — but beyond that they have no restrictions but only freedom and so are beyond moral good and evil. They may be moral or non-moral, however they choose.

Thus, as mentioned above, in accordance with *Theravāda* Buddhism, we can combine compassion (*karunā*) and even-mindedness (*upekkhā*) for either others or ourselves. Personal detachment need not involve an indifference to the needs and concerns of others but instead may involve a truly impartial concern for all. For the unenlightened, complete impartiality is impossible, since without even-mindedness being completely internalized some people are valued more than others. But the enlightened can be totally impartial. Impartiality is compatible with compassion since it is only a matter of treating all people equally. That is, being personally detached, and thus not treating some people with favoritism, does not mean being unconcerned for people. In short, the enlightened can have a dispassionate inner life and yet still perform moral actions.

In addition, the Buddha was willing to teach conflicting doctrines to different listeners, depending on their stage of development. For example, he told some that there is no mental development and others that there is. Thus, the beliefs and code of proper conduct and other action-guides of the unenlightened life are merely a means to an end "*Nibbāna*" (Bliss) and are of instrumental value only. Hence, they are totally superseded in the enlightened state. The unenlightened action-guides are not ultimate, nor ends in themselves, but merely the means to transform the practitioner to a new state and then to be discarded. Indeed, the values

of the unen-lightened state are an obstacle to be overcome by insight and the deconditioning of meditation. *Nibbāna* is beyond this world (*lokuttarā*) and so are its values.

To this Article, we bring a continuity of moral values or moral attitudes from the unenlightened to the enlightened state, and thus at least the code of proper conduct will govern the enlightened Buddhists' actions, even if merit no longer accrues for following it. Right conduct alone does not bring enlightenment, but this does not mean the enlightened state is beyond its precepts. Enlightenment is the final, complete internalization of Buddhist beliefs and values. Thus, the code of proper conduct and insight still remain inseparable. The enlightened still hold to the eightfold way — indeed, only they really fulfill it.

Conclusion

The conclusions are that the Theravāda path to moral attitude and enlightenment is pursued for selfish reasons un-justified by a concern about the effect of one's actions upon others, and the enlightened may or may not choose a moral way of life. Because the enlightened have the option not to be concerned with the welfare of others, the enlightenment experience and subsequent state cannot be deemed necessarily moral. Consequently, the path to the enlightened state cannot be indirectly justified as moral by arguing that it leads to a necessarily moral way of life. Therefore, the way of life of self-cultivation commended by the *Theravāda* remains essentially selfish and thus not moral.

Otherwise, we may wish to dismiss those elements of a religion that conflict with our sense of morality and then conclude that the tradition is in fact moral. Obviously, such reasoning is blatantly circular. Instead, we should accept the tradition as it is, not pick and choose elements based on a preconceived Western view of what must be the case. However, for the fully and completely enlightened Buddhas and those Arahantas who opt for a moral way of life, the completeness of their moral actions should be emphasized.

Their acts of compassion for the unenlightened can be called acts of love, not in the sense of being attached to another's happiness in any way, but in the sense of giving oneself completely to others without regard to possible personal consequences. But the important point is that their acts are still purely other-regarding, regardless of whether the concept of "morality" is applicable.

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