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# **Ethics in Buddhist Perspective**

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# I. The Basis of Buddhist Ethics

Ethics has to do with human conduct and is concerned with questions regarding what is good and evil, what is right and wrong, what is justice and what are our duties, obligations and rights.

Modern ethical philosophers belonging to the Analytic school of philosophy consider it their task merely to analyse and clarify the nature of ethical concepts or theories. For them, ethics constitutes a purely theoretical study of moral phenomena. They do not consider it their province to lay down codes of conduct, which they deem to be the function of a moral teacher, a religious leader or a prophet.

However, there are some philosophers, even in the modern world, as, for example, some of the existentialists, who consider it the duty of the philosopher to recommend ways of life or modes of conduct, which they consider desirable for the purpose of achieving some end, which they regard as valuable. Kierkegaard, for instance, considers that there are three stages of life, namely, the aesthetical or sensualist, the ethical and the religious. He indirectly recommends in his philosophy that we pass from one stage to another. The aesthetical or sensualist way of life, according to him, leads to boredom, melancholy and despair, so it needs to be

transfigured in the ethical stage, and so on.

In the philosophy of the Buddha, we have an analytical study of ethical concepts and theories as well as positive recommendations to lead a way of life regarded as “the only way” (*ekāyana magga; eso’va maggo natth’añño dassanassa visuddhiyā*, Dhp 274) for the attainment of the *summum bonum* or the highest Good, which is one of supreme bliss, moral perfection as well as of ultimate knowledge or realisation. This way of life is considered both possible and desirable because man and the universe are just what they are. It is, therefore, justified in the light of a realistic account of the nature of the universe and of man’s place in it.

While this way of life in its personal or cosmic dimension, as it were, helps us to attain the highest Good, if not in this very life, at least in some subsequent life, it also has a social dimension insofar as it helps the achievement of “the well-being and happiness of the multitude or of mankind as a whole” (*bahujanahita, bahujanasukha*). The well-being and happiness of mankind is another end considered to be of supreme, though relative, value in the Buddhist texts and this well-being and happiness is conceived of as both material and spiritual welfare.

Buddhist ethics, therefore, has a close connection with a social philosophy as well. This social philosophy is also fully developed. We have, in the Buddhist texts an account of the nature and origin of society and the causes of social change. There is also an account of the nature and functions

of government, the form of the ideal social order and how it is likely to be brought about.

In dealing with the ethics and social philosophy of Buddhism, we are trying to give an answer to the question, "What should we do?" In our previous essays, we tried to give answers to the questions, "How do we know?" and "What do we know?" The question, "What should we do?" has a personal as well as a social dimension. In a Buddhist frame of reference, the question, "What should we do?" concerns, on the one hand, what the goal of life should be or is and what we have to do for self-improvement, self-realisation and the attainment of the highest Good. On the other hand, the question has a social dimension and concerns what we have to do for the good of society or "for the welfare and happiness of mankind." The questions, "What should we do for our own good?" and "What should we do for the good of others or society?" are mutually related and what the relationship is, according to Buddhism, we shall examine later on.

At the same time, we must bear in mind that the questions, "What should we do?" "What do we know?" and "How do we know?" are also interrelated.

The majority of the essays in this series concerned the question, "What do we know?" The answer to this question constituted the Buddhist account of reality or the nature of man and the universe. It is a legitimate question to raise as to how we do know that reality was so and so. The answer

to this was given in the earlier essays concerning the means of knowledge and the nature of truth.

Now when we ask the question, “What should we do?” the answers we give presuppose a certain account of reality. Let us illustrate this. In one stanza in the Dhammapada, the sum and substance of Buddhist ethics is summed up as follows: “Not to do any evil, to cultivate the good and to purify one’s mind—this is the teaching of the Buddhas” (183). Now, someone may raise the question as to how we can be without doing what is called “evil” and cultivate what is called the “good” unless human beings have the freedom to do so.

If all our present actions, choices and decisions were strictly determined by our psycho-physical constitution—which is partly hereditary, by our environmental influences, by our psychological past, or by all together—how is it possible for us to refrain from evil or do good? The very possibility of our refraining from evil and doing good, therefore, depends on the fact that our choices and decisions are not strictly and wholly determined by such factors and in this sense are “free.” So ethical statements become significant only if there is human freedom in this sense. But the question as to whether there is human freedom in this sense is a question pertaining to the nature of reality. Is man so constituted that he has the capacity for “free” action in the above sense without his actions being strictly determined by external and internal causes?

If not, these ethical statements cease to be significant. It does not make sense to ask a human being to refrain from evil, if, considering his nature, he is incapable of doing so. If, however, man is “free” in the above sense, it would be significant to ask him to exercise his choice in a certain way, which is what we do when we ask him to refrain from evil and do good. But whether he is “free” or not in the above sense is not a question concerning ethics but a factual question concerning human nature. The answer belongs to the theory of reality and not ethics. This is an instance as to how ethics is related to the theory of reality. Or, in other words, how the answer to the question, “What should we do?” is related to the answer to the question, “What do we know about man and the universe?”

This question as to whether freedom in the above sense or free will is a fact is not the only one. There could be further questions. Even though one could, to some degree, refrain from evil and cultivate the good, despite all the influences external and internal that one is subject to, one may still ask what use it is for oneself to refrain from evil and do good.

One may maintain that if sporadic acts of evil or good do not change one’s nature for the better or make one’s lot happier and if death is the end of life, what purpose does it serve to refrain from evil, to do good and to cleanse the mind? Here, again, one of the answers would be that if this activity does not change our nature for the better or make our condition happier and death, in fact, is the end of life, there would not be much purpose in refraining from evil,

doing good and cleansing the mind, even if we had the freedom or capacity to do so. So all this would be to some purpose, only if such activity changed one's nature for the better and made one's condition happier in the long run, and if death was not, in fact, the end of individuality.

But the question as to whether this was so is a factual question: "Does refraining from evil and doing morally good acts tend to change one's nature for the better and make one's condition happier in the long run in a world in which physical death is not the end of individuality?" It is only if the answer to this question too is in the affirmative, that it would seem worthwhile or desirable in a moral sense (as opposed to a merely social sense) of refraining from evil, doing what is good and purifying the mind.

Although it would appear to be worthwhile to do this if the answer is in the affirmative and there is human survival after death, and the refraining from evil, the cultivation of the good and the purification of the mind result in a happier state for the individual, it may still be asked whether there is an end to such a process. Is there a highest Good or must the process of refraining from evil and cultivating the good, go on for ever with progression and regression? Here again, the question as to whether there is an end, which is one of supreme bliss, perfection and realisation of an unconditioned state of ultimate reality is a purely factual question. It is only if there is such a state that an end to conditioned existence would be possible.

So an ethical statement, which recommends the attainment of a highest Good, and lays down a way of life for such attainment, would be significant only if there is such a state which can be considered the highest Good for each and all to attain, and if the way of life does, in fact, lead to it. The question as to whether there is such a highest Good, and whether the way of life recommended leads to it, is, however, a factual question, which has to be established independently of the ethical recommendations.

It would, therefore, be the case that the ethics of Buddhism would be significant only if certain facts are true, viz. (1) there is freedom or free will in the sense enunciated, (2) there is human survival or the continuity of individuality, (3) this continuity is such that the avoidance of evil and the cultivation of the good along with the purification of mind tends to make our nature better and our condition happier, while the opposite course of action has the reverse effect, and (4) there is a state, when the mind is pure and cleansed of all defilements—a state of bliss, perfection, realisation and ultimate freedom.

In examining the Buddhist account of reality, we have already shown the truth of (2), (3) and (4). We have shown that there is pre-existence and survival after death, constituting a “continued becoming” (*punabbhava*). We have shown that karma (in the Buddhist sense) is operative and that morally good, evil and mixed acts make a difference to one’s nature and are followed by pleasant, unpleasant and mixed consequences, as the case may be. We have shown

that there is “that realm” (*atthi ... tad āyatanaṃ*, Ud 80) of Nibbāna beyond space-time and causation, which is the ultimate Good that all should attain and without which it would not be possible to transcend conditioned existence.

It remains for us to examine more fully than we have done, whether or not the Buddha asserts the reality of freedom or free will in the sense explained. By “free will” in a Buddhist context, it is not meant that there is a will, choice or decision which is unaffected by causal factors that affect it, but that our volitional acts or will, choice or decision, while being conditioned by such factors, are not wholly shaped or strictly determined by them, since there is in man “an element of initiative” (*ārabhadhātu*) or “personal action” (*purisakāra*) or “individual action” (*attakāra*), which can, within limits, resist the factors that affect it. If not for this factor of human personality, “moral responsibility” would be a farce and the forces that impel us to act would be responsible for our actions.

This is, in fact, what the Buddha says. On the one hand, he distinguishes the Buddhist theory of the “causal genesis” (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) of events from all forms of strict determinism, whether theistic or natural. According to the theistic version of strict determinism, every outcome in the universe is foreknown and pre-determined by an omniscient and omnipotent Personal God. In such a situation all our experiences would be “due to the creation by God” (*issara-nimmāna-hetu*). If so, argues the Buddha, God is ultimately responsible for the (good and) evil that

human beings do.

Such theistic determinists lived during the time of the Buddha. We must not forget that they are also found today. Dr. Hastings Rashdall, Fellow of New College, Oxford, whose two volumes on *The Theory of Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1907) are widely recommended and read by students of ethics even today was such a theistic determinist. He says in one place in his book: "And after all a doctrine of free-will which involves a denial of God's Omniscience cannot claim any superiority over such a theistic Determinism as I have defended on the score of avoiding a limitation of the divine Omnipotence" (Vol. II pp. 343, 344). He is led to believe in determinism because of his total distrust of indeterminism at the time when scientists believed in deterministic causation, prior to the discoveries of quantum physics. Dr. Rashdall, however, gives this scientific doctrine of his times an idealistic twist and says: "When the theory of Determinism is held in connexion with a philosophy which finds the ultimate ground and source of all being in a rational will, it is impossible to escape the inference that the will of God ultimately causes everything in the Universe which has a beginning—including therefore souls and their acts, good and bad alike" (ibid., p. 339).

Having taken up this position, he finds the consequences not too palatable and difficult to explain away, for he says: "Yet from the metaphysical or theological point of view we must admit also that the soul is made or caused by God: and

one cannot help asking oneself the question why God should make bad souls, and so cause bad acts to be done" (ibid., p. 340)

He also admits the central difficulty of his position, which he tries to explain away unsatisfactorily, viz. "We have seen then that the only point at which a difficulty is created either for Morality or for Religion by the acceptance of Determinism lies in its tendency to make God in a sense the "author of evil." (ibid., p, 345). So we see that the logic of theistic Determinism is no different from the Buddha's time to the present.

The Buddha also rejects different forms of natural determinism. One such theory was that experiences of (the good or) evil we do is "due to our (hereditary) physiological constitution" (*abhi-jāti-hetu*). Another theory upheld psychic determinism (cp. Freud) and held that "all our present acts and experiences are entirely due to our past actions" (*pubbekata-hetu*). In addition, there were at the time of the Buddha "natural determinists" (*svabhāva-vādin*), who held that all events were strictly determined by natural forces. Pūraṇa Kassapa was a "determinist" (*niyatīvādi*), who held such a theory. As a result of his natural determinism, he was like the 19th century rationalists of Europe, an amoralist who denied that there was good or evil as such, since man was not responsible for his so-called "good" or "evil" acts.

It is important to remember that the Buddhist theory of causation was opposed to all such Deterministic theories,

both theistic and natural, as also to the theory of total Indeterminism (*adhicca-samuppanna*) or Tychism, which denied causal correlations in nature altogether. As such, the Buddhist theory of causation seems to accept an element of indeterminacy in nature, which, in the case of human actions, manifests itself as the free will of the individual, which is *conditioned* but *not totally determined* by the factors that affect it.

While the Buddha distinguished his causal theory from determinism, he also faced the question of free will and asserted its reality in no uncertain terms. On one occasion, it is said, a certain brahmin (*aññataro brāhmaṇo*) approached the Buddha and told him that he was of the opinion that there was no free will on the part of himself (*attakāra*) or others (*para-kāra*). The Buddha admonished him and asked him how he could say such a thing when he himself of his own accord (*sayam*) could walk up to the Buddha and walk away from him.

On this occasion, the Buddha says that there is such a thing as “an element of initiative” (*ārabha-dhātu*) and as a result one can observe beings acting with initiative and this, says the Buddha, is what is called “the free will of people” (*sattānaṃ attakāro*).” He also goes on to say that there is “an element of origination” (*nikkama-dhātu*), an “element of endeavour” (*parakkama-dhātu*), an “element of strength” (*thāma-dhātu*), an “element of perseverance” (*ṭhiti-dhātu*) and an “element of volitional effort” (*upakkama-dhātu*), which makes beings of their own accord act in various ways and

that this showed that there was such a thing as free will (A III 337, 338).

We notice on the other hand that Makkhali Gosāla, the theist, who held that the world was created by a divine fiat and continued to unfold itself like a ball of thread flung on the ground, held that beings were “devoid of free will” (*natthi attakāro*), “devoid of personal will” (*natthi purisakāro*), “devoid of power, effort, personal strength or personal endeavour” (*natthi balaṃ, viriyaṃ, purisathāma, purisapparakkamo*) (D I 53). Those who denied the possibility and power of moral acts or in other words, free will and its consequences, were known at this time as *akiriya-vāḍins*. Thus, again, Makkhali Gosāla, the theist, is said to have held the doctrine that “there is no karma, there is no free action and no potentiality of action” (*natthi kammaṃ, natthi kiriyaṃ, natthi viriyaṃ*) (A I 286). It is well-known, however, that the Buddha was accepted even by his brahmin opponents as a *kiriya-vāḍin*, a teacher of the efficacy of action.

All this goes to prove that the Buddha faced the problem of free will at the time and reiterated the view that asserted the reality of human freedom or free will without denying at the same time that this free will was conditioned but not wholly shaped or determined by factors which affected it. There are certain things beyond our powers but there are at the same time certain powers which one can exercise within limits. For example, I cannot, even if I tried my utmost, speak a thousand words a minute, but I can certainly vary my speed of utterance within limits merely to show that I

have the power to do this. It is this power that we all have within limits for refraining from evil and doing good. The more we exercise this power the more freedom and spontaneity we acquire.

Many scholars have failed to see that Buddhism upheld a theory of non-deterministic causal conditioning along with the doctrine of free will. As a result Buddhism has been represented by some Western scholars as a form of fatalism because of their misunderstanding of the doctrine of karma as well as the doctrine of causation.

This misunderstanding, however, is not limited to Western scholars. A local Sinhala Buddhist scholar, a layman, has represented the Buddhist teaching on this matter as follows in a paper read before a philosophers' conference: "What does Buddhism have to say regarding free will?" The question does not seem ever to have been asked of the Buddha, but, if he had been asked, he would probably have answered that the question does not arise or that it is inaccurately put. There can be no such thing as a free will outside the causal sequence which constitutes the world process. [1] Another local Buddhist scholar, a monk, says the following: "The question of free will has occupied an important place in Western thought and philosophy. But according to Conditioned Genesis, this question does not and cannot arise in Buddhist philosophy ... Not only is the so-called free will not free, but even the very idea of free will is not free from conditions." [2]

These three doctrines, namely upholding the reality of free will (*kiriya-vāda*) as opposed to the denial of free will (*akiriya-vāda*) in the sense specified, upholding the reality of survival after death (*atthi paro loko*) as opposed to the denial of survival (*natthi paro loko*) and upholding the reality of moral causation (*hetu-vāda*) as opposed to the denial of moral causation (*ahetu-vāda*) form the basis of Buddhist ethics. They are upheld because they are considered to be verifiably true.

It is these doctrines which make individual moral responsibility meaningful. Without them there is no sense in which we can be said to be morally responsible for our actions although we may be socially responsible. In the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, [3] where the Buddha addresses rational sceptics, he states that even if one is sceptical about free will, survival and moral causation, it would be pragmatic and rational to act on the basis that they are true rather than their opposites, for in such a case, whatever happens, we do not stand to lose. If we act on the basis that free will, survival and moral causation are true, then if they turn out to be true, we would be happy in the next life and if not true, praised by the wise in this life, whereas if we do not act on this basis, then, if they are true, we would be unhappy in the next life, and if they are not true, we would be condemned by the wise in this life for acting without a sense of moral responsibility.

While the ethics of good and evil (in a moral sense as opposed to what is merely socially good and evil) require

the above three postulates, which, according to the Buddhist account of reality, are facts, the ethics of salvation from conditioned existence require the postulate of an Unconditioned Reality, which, according to Buddhism, is also a fact.

Man and the universe being what they are, the ethical and spiritual life (which in a sense is part of it) is both possible and the most desirable in our interests as well as of others.

## II. The Buddhist Ethical Ideal of the Ultimate Good

Moral philosophers use the term “good” in two important senses. There is the sense in which we speak of what is “good as an end” or what is “intrinsically good.” There is also the sense in which we speak of what is “good as a means” or what is “instrumentally good.” The two senses are inter-related. For what is instrumentally good, or good as a means, is necessary to bring about what is intrinsically good, or good as an end.

When the Dhammapada says that, “health is the greatest gain” (*ārogyā paramā lābhā*), it is, in a sense, treating the state of health as being what is good as an end. For whatever our gains may be, most people are prepared to lose them, or use them in order to recover their health, if they fall ill. Besides, it is only if we are healthy that we can adapt the means to gain material or even spiritual riches. If health is a desirable end to achieve or is good as an end, then what is instrumental in achieving this state of health is good as a means. Since medicines, even when they are bitter, are often useful as a means to the cure of illnesses, they are deemed to be good as a means, or instrumentally good.

Although some people would regard a state of physical health in the above sense as being good as an end, others

may say that good health is only a relative end since the ultimate end or goal that we should seek is happiness, and good health is only a necessary condition for happiness. So while no one would say that bitter medicine is good as an end, many people would regard a state of health as being good as an end only in a relative sense, as contributing to one's well-being and happiness. One's well-being and happiness would, therefore, be for them an ultimate end in a sense in which even physical health is not. Besides, in the world in which we live, we can enjoy a state of physical health only in a relative sense since we may fall ill from time to time and even healthy men eventually die.

In this chapter we shall be concerned only with what is ultimately good from the Buddhist point of view. Buddhism presents a clear conception of what is ultimately good and what is instrumentally good in order to achieve this. What is instrumentally good to achieve this end is regarded as good as a means. It consists mainly of right actions and the other factors that help in bringing about what is ultimately good.

These right actions may often be called good actions as opposed to evil actions. But we shall avoid the word "good actions" and consistently use the word "right actions" (as opposed to "wrong actions") in speaking about what is primarily necessary in order to achieve what is good as an end.

In the Buddhist texts, the terms that are most often used to denote "right actions" are *kusala* and *puñña*. *Kusala* means

“skilful” and denotes the fact that the performance of right actions requires both theoretical understanding as well as practise. The person who has attained the ideal or the highest good is referred to as a person of “accomplished skill or the highest skill” (*sampannakusalaṃ parama-kusalaṃ*). *Akusala*, its opposite, means the “unskillful.” *Puñña* as used of right action means what is “meritorious” as opposed to *pāpa*, which means “demeritorious.” It is not a term that is employed to denote the highest good. In fact, the person who has attained the highest good is said to have “cast aside both meritorious and demeritorious actions” (*puñña-pāpa-pahīna*).

As we shall see in examining the nature of right actions, this does not imply that meritorious actions (as opposed to demeritorious ones) are not necessary for the attainment of the highest good, nor that those who have attained are amoral. The path to salvation or the path leading to the highest good in Buddhism is a gradual path, and although we may start with our egoistic or self-centred desires as a motive for self-advancement, they have progressively to be cast aside until eventually the goodness of the actions alone remains without the personal motivation for doing good.

If we acquaint ourselves with the nature of the ethical ideal or the conception of what is intrinsically good or good as an end, we would be in a better position to understand the Buddhist conception of right and wrong.

Moral philosophers have conceived of the ethical ideal in

various ways. Some have thought of the ideal as pleasure and others as happiness. Yet others considered the notion of duty or obligation as central to ethics, while others again think of the goal as perfection.

What is the Buddhist conception of the ideal? Buddhism conceives of the ethical ideal as one of happiness, perfection, realisation and freedom. These ethical goals, in fact, coincide and the highest good is at the same time one of ultimate happiness, moral perfection, final realisation and perfect freedom. This is the goal to be attained in the cosmic or personal dimension of existence.

This is a goal for one and all to attain, each in his own interest as well as that of others. Besides, there is a social ideal, which is also desirable to bring into existence. This is broadly conceived of as “the well-being or happiness of the multitude or mankind” (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*). Here “well-being and happiness” is conceived of both materially as well as spiritually. The ideal society in which this well-being and happiness will prevail in an optimum form is conceived of as both socialistic, being founded on the principle of equality, and democratic, as affording the best opportunities for the exercise of human freedom. Such a society is also just, as it is based on principles of righteousness.

We shall explore the nature of these conceptions in greater detail when examining the social philosophy of Buddhism. We shall also examine in a later chapter the relationship that

exists between the social ideal and the personal ideal. Although from an individualistic point of view “the path to the acquisition of wealth is one, while the path to Nibbāna is another” (*aññā hi labhūpanisā aññā nibbānagāmini*), even the social ideal can be attained, it is said, only by people who are motivated to act in accordance with the ten virtues (*dasakusala-kamma*) in a society built on firm economic, political and moral foundations.

What is the role of pleasure and the performance of one’s duties in relation to the Buddhist ethical ideal? Let us first take the role of pleasure. Buddhism recognises the importance of the hedonistic principle that man is predominantly motivated to act out of “his desire for happiness and his repulsion for unhappiness” (*sukha-kāmā hi manussā dukkha-paṭikkūlā*). In fact, the central truths of Buddhism “the four truths concerning unhappiness” (*dukkha-sacca*), are formulated in the manner set forth so as to appeal to man’s intrinsic desire for happiness and the desire to escape from or transcend his unhappiness.

Pleasure is classified in the Buddhist texts according to its different grades, and it is stated that “the most refined and sublimest form of pleasure” (*uttaritarāṃ pañītataraṃ*) is the bliss of Nibbāna. This “experience of the bliss of freedom” (*vimutti-sukha-paṭisaṃvedī*) is so different from the conditioned pleasure and happiness of worldly existence that there is a reluctance on the part of the texts to use the word *vedanā* (feeling of it) since *vedanā* as represented in the formula of conditionality is always conditioned.

The attitude to pleasure in the Buddhist texts is a realistic one. It does not deny the fact or value of pleasure. The limited good (*assāda*) as well as the evil consequences (*ādīnava*) of even the gross forms of pleasure are recognised. The Buddha did not advocate a form of asceticism whereby we should shun all pleasures by closing our eyes and ears (and becoming like the blind and the deaf) to objects which arouse sensuous pleasure. Instead the Buddha wanted those who were addicted to such pleasures to realise their limitations.

One form of pleasure that we experience is by the gratification of our desires. We get satisfaction from time to time by gratifying our desire for sensuous pleasures and sex (*kāma-taṇhā*). We get such temporary satisfaction, again, by gratifying our egoistic instincts (*bhava-taṇhā*) such as the desire for self-preservation (*jīvitukāma*), for security, for possessions, for fame, for personal immortality, etc. We also get satisfaction by gratifying our desire for destruction (*vibhava-taṇhā*) or aggression (*paṭigha*) or the elimination of what we dislike. The enjoyment of these pleasures is often accompanied by rationalisations or erroneous beliefs, such as, for instance, that we have been created for such a life of enjoyment of this sort or that we should eat, drink and be merry today for tomorrow we die.

What is important is not to shun pleasure or torment the body, but to realise for oneself the limitations of pleasures and the diminishing returns they afford, so that eventually we can transcend them by a life of temperance and restraint

and enjoy the immaterial or spiritual forms of pleasure (*nirāmiṣa-sukha*), which accompany selfless and compassionate activity based on understanding. One must give up the gross forms of pleasure for the more refined and superior kinds of happiness. As the Dhammapada states, “if by renouncing a little pleasure we can find a great deal of happiness, then the prudent man should relinquish such trifling pleasures on discovering an abundant happiness” (*mattā sukha-pariccāgā passe ce vipulaṃ sukhaṃ, caḥe mattā sukhaṃ dhīro samphassaṃ vipulaṃ sukhaṃ*, Dhṃ 290).

This is only an extension of the hedonistic principle that man has a tendency to seek pleasure and to recoil from pain and, therefore, that he ought to do what is both rational and possible by giving up the gross forms of pleasure for the more sublime forms until he eventually attains the supreme bliss of Nibbāna.

These more sublime forms of pleasure are correlated with forms of activity, which are spiritually elevating and socially desirable. It is not always necessary that one should literally renounce the worldly life in order to cultivate them. Both laymen and monks can attain the first stage of spiritual progress (*sotāpanna*) as well as some of the later stages as well. A person who can perform the duties associated with his livelihood, provided it is a right mode of living (*sammā ājīva*), with a sense of selfless service to his fellow men out of concern, compassion, and understanding; can act without a narrowly selfish motivation, and derive happiness from his work. The Buddha compared the spiritual gains to be

had from the lay life and the life of the monk to agriculture and trade. Agriculture gives slow but steady returns, while trade gives quicker returns though it is more risky.

According to the Buddha, nothing could be worse than the outward renunciation of the lay life in order to live a life of corruption and hypocrisy as a recluse. Such a person, apart from the disservice he would be doing to the community, would be digging his own grave.

However, the ignorance that clouds the judgment of man is such that a man who enjoys the grosser forms of pleasure cannot experience anything “more refined or more sublime,” since he is addicted to them. So what often happens is that he experiences less and less of both “pleasure and happiness because of his reluctance to go against the current (*paṭisotagāmī*) until eventually he becomes a slave to his passions, losing both his freedom and happiness as well as every other quality, which can bring him closer to the ethical ideal.

While Buddhist ethics recognises, and appeals to, the hedonistic tendencies of man, it does not fall into the error of hedonism by asserting that pleasure alone, abstracted from everything else, is what is worth achieving. The hedonistic ideal of supreme happiness, for example, is also identical with the therapeutic goal of perfect mental health.

So the path to happiness is also the path to mental stability, serenity, awareness, integration and purity of mind. The Buddha classified diseases as bodily (*kāyika*) and mental

(*cetasika*) and it is said that while we have bodily diseases from time to time, mental illness is almost continual until arahatship is attained so that only the saint or a person with a Nibbānic mind can be said to have a perfectly healthy mind.

While the four noble truths, as we have pointed out, on the one hand, indicate the path from unhappiness to perfect happiness, they have also the form of a medical diagnosis. From this point of view, the truths give an account of (1) the nature of the illness, its history and prognosis, (2) the causes of the illness, (3) the nature of the state of health that we ought to achieve and (4) the remedial measures to be taken in order to achieve this. This diseased state of the mind is due to the unsatisfied desires and the conflicts caused by the desires that rage within our minds both at the conscious and unconscious levels. Thus, the desire for sense pleasures and selfish pursuits is found as a subliminal or latent tendency as well (*rāgānusaya*; cp. *kāma-raga*, *bhavarāga*). So is our hatred or aggression (*paṭighānusaya*). Mental serenity, stability and sanity can be achieved neither by free indulgence in our desires (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*) nor by ascetic repression and self-torment (*attakilamathanuyoga*). When we become more aware of the way these desires operate in us by the exercise or practise of awareness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), we gradually attain a level of consciousness, in which there is a greater degree of serenity and stability. The culmination of this development, when the mind is purged of all its defilements, is the perfect state of mental

health, which coincides with the experience of the highest bliss.

Buddhism points to the sources of unhappiness, or the causes of suffering, not to make us unhappy or brood over our lot, but in order that we may emerge from our condition with stronger, happier and healthier minds. Such people could say in the words of the Dhammapada:

“So happily we live, free from anger among those who are angry”

(*susukhaṃ vata jīvāma verinesu averino*, Dhṃ 197)

“So happily we live in good health amongst the ailing”

(*susukhaṃ vata jīvāma āturesu anāturā*, Dhṃ 198)

“So happily we live relaxed among those who are tense”

(*susukhaṃ vata jīvāma ussukesu anussukā*. Dhṃ 199)

The person who has attained the ideal is said to have fulfilled all his obligations (*kata-karaṇīya*) since the greatest obligation of everyone, whatever else he may do, is the attainment of the goal of Nibbāna. But, till he does this, man has all his social duties to perform towards the various classes of people in society. The duties and obligations of parents and children, employers and employees, husbands and wives, religious men and their followers etc. are given in the Sigālovāda Sutta, while duties and rights of a king or state and its citizens are recorded in the Aggañña and Cakkavattisihanāda Suttas. Even such duties and

obligations are to be performed in a spirit of selfless service, love and understanding, so that we are treading the path to Nibbāna in the exercise of these obligations.

So while the ultimate end is one of perfect happiness and mental health, it is not one in which one is obliged to perform one's duties for duty's sake. Likewise, when the arahant serves society as the several enlightened monks and nuns mentioned in the Thera- and Therīgāthā did, they did so out of a spontaneous spirit of selflessness, compassion and understanding.

It is, therefore, a mistaken notion to hold, as some scholars have held, that the arahant is amoral and could even do evil with impunity. It is true that an arahant "casts aside both meritorious and demeritorious actions" (*puñña-pāpa-pahīna*). By this is meant only that he does not do any acts, whether they be good or evil with the expectation of reward nor do these acts have any efficacy for bringing about karmic consequences in the future. They are mere acts (*kiriya-matta*) of goodness, which flow spontaneously from a transcendent mind, which shines with its natural lustre with the elimination of craving, hatred and delusion and is wholly filled with selflessness (*cāga*), loving kindness (*mettā*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

The following passage illustrates the process and nature of this attainment:

"In whatever monk who was covetous, covetousness is got rid of ... wrath, grudging, hypocrisy, spite,

jealousy, stinginess, treachery, craftiness, ... who was of evil desires, evil desires is got rid of, who was of wrong view, wrong view is got rid of ... He beholds himself purified of all these unskilled states and sees himself freed (*vimuttaṃ attānaṃ samanupassati*) ... When he beholds himself freed, delight is born; rapture is born from delight; when he is in rapture, the body is tranquil; when the body is tranquil, he experiences joy; being joyful the mind is concentrated. He dwells suffusing one direction with a mind of loving kindness (*mettāsaḥagatena cetasā*), likewise the second, third and fourth; just so, above, below, across; he dwells having suffused the whole world everywhere, in every way with a mind of friendliness that is far-reaching, wide-spread, immeasurable, without enmity, without malevolence. He abides with a mind full of pity (*karuṇā*) ... sympathetic joy (*mudita*) ..., equanimity (*upekkhā*) ..., without enmity, without malevolence. It is as if there were a lovely lotus pond with clear water, sweet water, cool water, limpid, with beautiful banks; and a man were to come along from the east, west, north or south, overcome and over-powered by the heat, exhausted, parched and thirsty. On coming to that lotus pond, he might quench his thirst with water and quench his feverish heat. Even so ... one who has come into this Dhamma and discipline taught by the Buddha, having thus developed loving kindness,

pity, sympathetic joy and equanimity attains inward calm" (M I 283)

We find it expressly stated of the saint that he is a "person of accomplished skill (*sampanna-kusala*), of the highest skill (*parama-kusala*), who has attained the highest attainment, an invincible recluse," who is endowed with "right aspirations (*sammā-saṅkappa*) such as compassion (*avihiṃsā-vitakka*), which do not require to be further disciplined (*asekha*)." The arahant's state is, therefore, one of moral perfection though it is not one of "conditioned morality, but natural or spontaneous morality"; he is said to be "naturally virtuous and not virtuous through conditioning" (*silavā hoti no ca sīlamayo*).

This state of bliss or ultimate happiness, perfect mental health and moral perfection is also described as a state of supreme freedom (*vimutta*) and realisation (*sambodhi, paññā*). The mind is master of itself (*vasī*) and one has supreme control over it. The inflowing impulses (*āsavā*) do not disturb it.

The criticism has been made that the quest for Nibbāna is a form of escapism. But this criticism is without basis since the person who attains Nibbāna does so with full understanding of the nature of the world as well as of himself. If he ceases to be henceforth attracted by the pleasures of the world, it is because he can assess their worth and their limitations. The real escapists are the people who cannot, in fact, face reality as a whole and try to drown

their fears, anxieties, and sorrows by indulging in their passions. They are easily upset by their circumstances and find consolation in some form of neurosis. But the person who has a Nibbānic mind, or is anywhere near it, is “unruffled by the ups and downs of the world, is happy, unstained and secure” (*phutṭhassa lokadhammehi cittaṃ yassa na kampati asokaṃ virajaṃ khemaṃ*).

In such a state one has “no fear or anxiety” (*abhaya*) at all. The highest good or the ethical ideal for each person is, therefore, conceived of as a state of bliss, mental health, perfection, freedom and realisation. It is a state that is stable (*dhuva*) and ineffable (*amosadhamma*) as well.

### III. The Buddhist Conception of Evil

We have shown that Buddhism considered the attainment of Nibbāna to be intrinsically good. It was the highest state of well-being, characterised by bliss, perfection, realisation and freedom. It was a condition in which our finitude comes to an end for “there was no criterion with which to measure the person who has attained the goal” (*atthaṃgatassa na pamāṇaṃ atthi*, Sn 1076). It was the most desirable state to attain, and the highest aesthetic experience, although it was to be realised only by shedding our self-centred desires.

In contrast, what falls short of Nibbānic reality is, to that

extent, afflicted with the evils of unhappiness or suffering, imperfection, ignorance and the bondage of finite self-centred existence. The degree to which those in conditioned forms of existence are affected by these evils varies with their level of existence and the extent of their moral and spiritual development.

So all sentient beings are subject to evil in its various forms until they attain Nibbāna. The evil they are subject to may be external and physical (natural or man-made), such as floods, accidents, nuclear weapons, etc., or they may be experienced in one's body in the form of illness. They may be psychological, such as the experience of pain or mental anguish. The evil may be moral such as the presence of undesirable traits in us, such as jealousy, hypocrisy, ingratitude, etc. Or the evil which affects and afflicts us may be social and political such as the experience of poverty, injustice, inequality or the lack of freedom.

## Hell

Yet, whatever evils we may be, subject to in our finite self-centred conditioned existence, there is no form of existence in the universe which is intrinsically evil according to the Buddhist texts. Nothing could be more intrinsically evil than the sufferings of an everlasting hell, from which there

is no escape for eternity, but there is no such place according to the Buddhist conception of the universe.

In fact, the Buddhist conception of hell was both enlightened and rational. The Buddha denounced some of the superstitious popular beliefs about hell, held by the people at the time. For instance, he says in one place: "When the average ignorant person makes an assertion to the effect that there is a hell (*pātāla*) under the ocean, he is making a statement which is false and without basis. The word "hell" is a term for painful bodily sensations" (S IV 306).

This does not mean that we create our heavens and hells only in this life and that there is, in fact, no afterlife, for elsewhere the Buddha speaks of the worlds that he could observe with his clairvoyant vision, in which everything one senses and experiences (including the thoughts that occur to one) are foul, repulsive and ugly (S IV 126), while other worlds are quite the opposite.

These are the "hells" of the Buddhist texts, apart from the experience of "hell" in this life itself. We learn from history about the existence of cannibalistic tribes in the past, not to speak of life in the concentration camps set up not so long ago in the centres of twentieth century civilisation. As such, we need not necessarily look to other planets for the presence of sub-human forms of existence, which are "foul, repulsive and ugly." Yet none of these states are permanent, even though they exist.

# Problem of Evil

The Buddha squarely faces the existence of evil in the universe. He sees things “as they are” (*yathābhūtaṃ*) and wants his disciples, too, to look at things in this way through the eyes of a realist. There is no escape into a world of make-believe, no undue pessimism nor facile optimism. The Buddha says: “There are religious teachers, who, because of their state of confusion, do not recognise the difference between night and day, but I would treat night as night and day as day” (M I 21). Buddhism, therefore, frankly accepts the existence of both good and evil in the world of conditioned existence.

Evil becomes a problem only for a theist, who maintains that the world was created by a perfect being, omniscient, omnipotent, and infinitely good. In such a situation, it would be possible to account for evil by denying the omniscience, omnipotence or goodness of God, but then one would be denying that the world was the creation of a perfect Being. So the problem is—*Si Deus bonus, unde malum?* If God is good, whence cometh evil?

In order to account for evil with these presuppositions, some have denied outright the fact of evil, others have stated that evil is a privation or illusion, or has only a relative existence, while still others have maintained that evil is necessary as a component in the best of all possible

worlds, which God necessarily creates. This last solution has, on the whole, been favoured by modern theists, but even this does not satisfactorily account for the suffering of animals, of little children and innocent people within the framework of orthodox theistic beliefs.

What is the Buddhist solution of this problem? The problem does not exist in the above form for the Buddhist since he does not start with the theistic presumption that the world was created by a perfect Being. Instead, he accepts the fact of evil and argues on its basis that the world with all its imperfections could not be the creation of a perfect Being.

The argument is briefly stated as follows: "If God (Brahmā) is lord of the whole world and creator of the multitude of beings, then why (I) has he ordained misfortune in the world without making the whole world happy, or (II) for what purpose has he made a world with injustice, deceit, falsehood and conceit, or (III) the lord of beings is evil in that he has ordained injustice where there could have been justice" (J-a VI 208).

The Buddhist is under no compunction to deny or explain away the fact of evil. If we deny the existence of evil, there would be no reason or even the possibility of getting rid of it. If we justify it, it would still be unnecessary to try and eliminate it. But evil is real for the Buddhist and must be removed as far as possible at all its levels of existence for the good and happiness of mankind, by examining its causal origins.

This does not mean that Buddhism holds that all existence is evil. The Buddha is often represented by Western scholars as having said this or assumed such a stand.

The *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* says that, “existence ... seemed to the Buddha to be evil” (See Article on Good and Evil). Yet nowhere has the Buddha said that even finite conditioned existence is wholly evil. What he has often said is that such existence has its good side or pleasantness (*assāda*) as well as its evil consequences (*ādinavā*), and, considering the possibility of transcending such finite conditioned existence, it was desirable to do so.

## Primacy of the Good

Buddhism does not hold that evil predominates in nature. It is possible to take up different positions regarding the presence or primacy of good or evil.

We can say that (i) good predominates over evil although both exist, or that (ii) good alone exists but not evil or that (iii) evil predominates over good although both exist or that (iv) evil alone exists but not good or that (v) both good and evil exist with equal strength and vigour (dualism,) and there is a perpetual battle in the universe between the forces of good and evil or that (vi) neither good nor evil exist in

any strict sense (e, g. relativism, amoralism, illusionism (*māyāvāda*)).

Buddhism seems to favour the first point of view. It accepts the reality of both good and evil and seems to uphold the view that good predominates over evil.

The presence of some forms of evil such as suffering, it is said, has a tendency to awaken us from our lethargic state of existence and induce belief in moral and spiritual values (*dukkhupanisā saddhā*, S II 1).

We are attached to the world because of the joys and satisfactions it affords us by way of the gratification of our desires. But because of the disappointments, frustrations, anguish and suffering that we also experience in the process we seek to understand and transcend our finite conditioned existence.

So some forms of evil such as suffering have a tendency to make us seek the good. But, in general, the problem of evil for the Buddhist is to recognise evil as such, to look for its verifiable causes and by removing the causes, eliminate evil as far as possible at all its levels of existence.

To look for the metaphysical causes of evil is deemed to be intellectually stultifying and morally fruitless. If we are struck with an arrow, our immediate task should be to remove it rather than investigate the credentials of the person who shot it. We may be in a better position to do so after we have been healed. The Dhamma, as the Buddha pointed out, is comparable to a raft, which has to be thrown

aside after we have attained Nibbāna with its help and acquired a more comprehensive picture of the totality of things. In the meantime, the presence of evil is a challenge to us and our task should be to get rid of it: “One should conquer evil with good” (*asādhum sādhunā jine*).

The baseless charge has been brought against Buddhism, namely that it is pessimistic, but it is a curious fact that it has given a less pessimistic account of both man and nature than some forms of theism. We have already pointed out that there is no conception of an “eternal hell” in nature according to Buddhist teachings. Even in respect of man, he has never been regarded as predominantly evil.

Man is fundamentally good by nature and the evil in him is an extraneous outcome of his saṃsāric conditioning. The mind of man is compared in the Buddhist texts to gold-ore, which is said to have the defilements of iron, copper, tin, lead and silver but when these impurities are removed, then the gold shines, with its natural lustre. So does the mind when the evil is got rid of.

The Buddha states that “the mind is naturally resplendent though it is corrupted by adventitious defilements” (*pabhassaram idaṃ cittaṃ taṃ ca kho āgantukehi upakkilesehi upakkiliṭṭhaṃ*). Man, therefore, despite the fact that he has committed sin (*pāpa*) and is capable of sinning is not addressed as a “sinner” but as “meritorious being” (e. g. Sinhala, *pinvatnī*) because of his potentiality for good.

Even the evil that he commits is not due to his basic

depravity or wickedness but to his ignorance. This ignorance can be got rid of and man himself is capable of doing so. Buddhism does not agree with the theist who holds that man in his present condition is so degenerate by nature that he is incapable of saving himself without the grace of an external power. The future of man is in his own hands; he is master of his fate. In denying an eternal hell, in not regarding man as a sinner who is incapable of attaining salvation by his own efforts, Buddhism gives a less pessimistic account of man and nature than is to be found in some forms of theism.

Although in this respect, it upholds the primacy of the good, Buddhism is not an easy-going optimism, which ignores the evil in man and nature. A realistic view of nature is partly pessimistic in that one has to take cognizance of the darker side of things as well. Many people, out of fear, do not wish to contemplate the fact that we are all liable to suffer from decay, disease and death. The Buddha, on the contrary, holds (like Socrates and Plato) that “the contemplation of death” (*maraṇānussati*) is of therapeutic value in making for mental stability and peace. To this extent, Buddhism recommends a partly “pessimistic outlook” (*asubhānupassim viharantaṃ*, Dhṛ 8) insofar as it is realistic and is a factor necessary to promote and establish one’s personal happiness on firm foundations.

## Māra

Buddhist realism, therefore, takes stock of all that is evil in man and nature, so that we may understand evil for what it is and overcome it at all its levels of existence in so far as this can be done.

Death (*mṛtyuḥ*) had been personified prior to Buddhism and the Śāthapatha Brāhmaṇa refers to the legendary figure of “Death, the Evil One” (*mṛtyuḥ pāpmā*). This conception reappears in the Buddhist scriptures as “Māro Pāpimā,” i.e. “Death, the Evil One,” who signifies all the evil associated with or causally related to the phenomenon of death. Since all conditioned existence is subject to death, Māra is said to hold sway over the entire universe.

The term Māra is formed of the root *mṛ*, to kill (cf. Latin, *mors*), and means “killer or death.” In the scholastic tradition, the term is said to have four meanings. It may signify physical death (*maccu-māra*); it may denote the constituents of one’s personality, which are subject to change and, therefore, to “death” in this wider sense (*khandha-māra*); it may mean “moral evil” or the defilements, which are the cause of repeated (birth and) death (*kilesa-māra*); or it may refer to the Evil One as a person (*devaputta-māra*), who tempts and obstructs people who seek emancipation from conditioned existence by means of a life of moral and spiritual development.

In this last sense, Māra symbolises all the opposition and obstruction that spiritual seekers have to contend with, whether this be internal (psychological) or external

(physical, social). It is difficult to say that there is no such opposition towards those who seek to do good, when we know that outstanding teachers in history who tried to preach or establish a new universal ethic had to face not only opposition but even death at the hands of their own people, which provoked the Shavian remark that “it is dangerous to be too good.”

The question is often asked as to whether Buddhism recognises the existence of such an Evil One as a person (such as Satan or the Devil). The forces (*sena*) of Māra as depicted in the Buddhist texts constitute merely the symbolic representation of evil in various forms. For example, the Mahā Niddesa speaks of the forces of Māra as consisting of lust (*kāma*), aversion (*arati*), hunger and thirst (*khuppipāsā*), desire (*taṇhā*), sloth and torpor (*thīnamiddha*), fear (*bhīru*), doubt regarding moral and spiritual truths and values (*vicikicchā*), hypocrisy (*makkha*), hardness of heart (*thambha*), the gain, praise, respect and fame obtained by false pretences (*lābho siloko sakkāro micchāladdho ca yo yaso*) as well as boasting about oneself while despising others (*yo c’attānaṃ samukkaṃse pare ca avajānāti;*” (Mahā Niddesa, I 96).

There are, however, situations in the Canon where Māra appears in person and criticises some of the teachings of the Buddha or propounds doctrines which are opposed to them. Does this not prove the personal existence of Māra? Even prior to Buddhism we find that the Kāṭha Upaniṣad employed the figure of Death or Mr̥tyuḥ to impart an

Ātman-doctrine: The entire teaching of the Kaṭha Upanisad is said to have been “declared by Death” (*mṛtyu-proktāṃ*, Kaṭha, 6.18), who does not appear in a derogatory role, probably because the functions of death, control and creation are in the hands of the Supreme Being. It would, therefore, not be surprising if the legendary figure of Māra is utilised as a literary device by the compilers of the Canon to indicate the Buddha’s comments and criticisms of doctrines, belief in which was likely to prolong one’s conditioned existence. On the other hand, we cannot rule out the possibility of higher intelligences in the cosmos, who believe profoundly in and like to propagate some of the views attributed to Māra.

However, it is quite evident that the figure of Māra is often introduced in the Canon for purely didactic purposes and no personal manifestation of evil is meant. In the Nivāpa Sutta (M I 151–60) it is said that a sower sows crops for the deer to come and eat. The first herd eat indulgently and fall an easy prey to the sower. The second herd, observing this, avoid the crops and repair to the forest close by, but, weakened by hunger, are forced to come and eat the crops and do so with avidity and thereby fall a prey to the sower. The third herd, observing what happened to the first two, partake of the crops without being infatuated and repair to a lair close by, which, however, is easily discovered by the sower, who is able to catch them. The fourth herd, observing the mistakes committed by the first three, repair to a lair to which the sower has no access and thereby

escape.

Here, the sower is said to be Māra, the Evil One, and the crops constitute indulgence in the pleasures of the senses. The four herds constitute four types of religious sects. The first finds nothing wrong in free indulgence in the pleasures of sense and become easy victims of Māra. The second resorts to asceticism but eventually returns to indulgence, the need for it being heightened by their repressions. The third exercises restraint in the enjoyment of sense-pleasures but their dogmatic beliefs about man and the world keep them within the realm and dominance of Māra. It is only the fourth, who follow a Buddhist way of life, who are successful in going beyond the clutches of Māra. There is nothing to suggest that Māra, in actual fact, operates as a personal entity here. The parable of the crops merely shows that ultimate salvation cannot be found within the realm of conditioned existence.

## Destruction of Evil

The passage quoted from the Niddesa above, where various evils were figuratively referred to as “the forces of Māra” ends by saying that “it is only by conquering the forces of Māra that one attains happiness” (*jetvā ca labhate sukhaṃ*). The Buddha and the arahants, it is said, have conquered

Māra and, therefore, can recognise him and do not fall a victim to his wiles. The Dhammapada recommends that we “should fight Māra with the weapon of wisdom” (*yodhetha Māraṃ paññāvudhena*, Dhṛ 40).

So the Buddhist attitude to evil is not to deny its presence or try to reconcile its existence with the creation of the world by a good God, but to observe its presence and, by studying its nature and causes, to eliminate it.

As far as one’s personal evolution is concerned, one must develop the awareness and “the will to prevent the arising of evil states of mind not arisen, the will to eliminate evil states of mind which have arisen, the will to make arise good states of mind which have not arisen and the will to preserve, develop, refine and perfect good states of mind which have arisen” (S V 268).

It is the same with social and political forms of evil. According to the Buddhist social contract theory of government, the people are ultimately responsible for the good government of the country. If the country is not properly governed, it is up to the people to ensure such a government in order to promote the material and spiritual welfare of the people by the promotion of the good and the elimination of evil in the body politic.

## Pirit

We have so far dealt with realistic forms of evil. “But some of our fears (which are themselves evil) are based on irrational foundations, such as the fear of the unknown. At the time of the Buddha, such fears were allayed by magical and ritualistic means with the help of the chants and incantations of the Atharva Veda or the resort to demonological practises. Where the people were not mentally equipped to give up these beliefs and practises, what the Buddha did was to substitute Buddhist chants (*paritta*, safeguard) of a more meaningful character, which developed into the institution of *pirit*.

Instead of chanting in an unintelligible language, the Buddha used the language of the people. In doing so, he used it as a vehicle of instruction as well. For example, the Maṅgala Sutta (chanted as *pirit*) is an attempt to answer the question, “What are the auspicious things?” The word *maṅgala* could also be translated as “superstitious observance” and in one place the Buddha, referring to the lay people at the time, says that they were superstitious” (*gihī maṅgalikā*, Vin II 140). Now the list of “auspicious things or observances” given in the Maṅgala Sutta, far from being superstitions, were factors or practises which contributed to the social and personal advancement of people. To take but one stanza, the Buddha says: “a good, education (*bāhusaccaṃ*), acquiring a technical skill (*sippaṃ*), a well-cultivated sense of discipline (*vinayo ca susikkhito*) and cultured speech (*subhāsītā ca yā vācā*)—these are the auspicious things” (Sn 261). The practises recommended are

of relevance to any civilised society.

So while the people derived a psychological satisfaction and a sense of security by listening to this chant, they also received an education in the Dhamma. Those who listened with rapt attention, appreciated what was said, and tried to live in accordance with the teachings, would also have the protection of the Dhamma, for it is said that “the Dhamma protects him who lives in accordance with the Dhamma” (*dhammo have rakkhati dhammacāriṃ*).

# IV. The Criteria of Right and Wrong

We normally use the words “right” or “wrong” to denote classes of acts and sometimes the specific acts of human beings. Thus, what we mean when we say that, “murder is wrong” is that the class of acts, which are classified as “murder” are “wrong.” But sometimes we may say that his action in the specific situation in which he was placed was “right.” We do not use these words to denote the acts of animals though, perhaps, the acts of some animals in rare situations may seem to us to be “right” or “wrong,” as the case may be.

Even with regard to human beings, we do not consider all their acts as being “right” or “wrong.” When a person eats bread instead of buns for his morning meal, when what he eats makes no difference to him or others, we do not consider this act of his “right” or “wrong.” We deem it to be “morally neutral” along with many of his actions, including reflex actions. Likewise, some of his actions may be partially right and partially wrong and therefore of a “mixed” character. So a man’s actions may be classified as being morally right (*kusala*), morally wrong (*akusala*), morally neutral (*avyākata*) and morally “mixed” (i.e. both right and wrong, *vokiṇṇa*) in character.

It makes sense to speak of some acts as being right and others as being wrong or “mixed” in character, only if human beings were free to act within limits in a causally conditioned world. If a man’s actions were mere responses to stimuli or merely reflected the hereditary structure or constitution of his body, or were strictly determined by his psychological past, then it would not make sense to say that his actions were right or wrong, since they are constrained and not free. So if his actions are deemed to be right or wrong, it is because although his decisions and acts “are causally conditioned by circumstances, they are not strictly determined and man has the freedom (*attakāra*) to act within certain limits in the universe in which he lives.

Besides, as we have shown in our previous talk, man and the universe are such that the moral and spiritual life is not only possible but is the most desirable. This is because in addition to the fact of freedom within a context of causal conditioning, there is ethico-psychological causation as well as survival after death. Our decisions, which result in right or wrong acts, make a difference to our nature and future. They have their own personal reactions in this life as well as in lives to come. These three facts, as often emphasised by the Buddha (e. g. *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*), namely freedom (*kiriyaavāda*), survival (*atthi paro loko*) and moral causation (*hetuvāda*) make moral responsibility a reality and self-development a practical possibility as well as a dire necessity. What we do by way of our mental, verbal and bodily acts makes a difference to our nature and regulates

our future development.

This is what is often emphasised in the Dhammapada: “By oneself alone is evil done, by oneself is evil avoided and by oneself alone is one saved (lit purified). Salvation and damnation depend on oneself (paccattaṃ) no one can save another” (Dhp 165). We are what we are not because of evolutionary necessity, God’s grace or accidental happiness but because of what we can make of ourselves by the exercise of our own freedom and effort. So the teaching of the Buddha can help us only if we decide to follow it: “You yourselves must make the effort,” says the Buddha, “the Transcendent Ones are only teachers; those who follow the path and meditate are delivered from the bonds of Māra” (Dhp 276).

This moral and spiritual development, as we have shown in one of our previous talks, is not an unending process for its goal is Nibbāna, the ultimate good or the ethical ideal according to Buddhism, a goal which may be achieved by some in this life itself.

In this talk, we propose to examine the nature and the characteristics of these acts, which are designated “right” or “wrong.” What makes right acts right and wrong acts wrong? What is the measure or what are the criteria, which enable us to recognise and distinguish right acts from wrong?

We may state at the outset that moral philosophers have expressed a variety of opinions on this subject. Few thinkers

are, in fact, in agreement about the nature of right or wrong acts or their analysis.

The objectivists have held that acts are right or wrong, irrespective of the person by whom or the time and place at which they are performed. Among the objectivist theories are metaphysical theories such as those of the theists. They have held either that right actions are right because this is God's will or that God has willed them because they are right or that God's will and what is right coincide. However, the conflicting accounts of God's will in the different theistic scriptures and the fact that some of the alleged divine commands do not appear to be right, apart from the objections from relativism, makes this a difficult theory to accept. Other objectivists have put forward naturalistic theories. Some are sociological and hold that right actions are actions which are conducive to the survival of mankind. Still others, such as the utilitarians assert that right actions are productive of a maximum amount of pleasure for human beings.

Among the objectivists many are intuitionists, who claim that the rightness or wrongness of actions can be directly apprehended by one's intuition like mathematical truths or can be perceived like perceiving the difference between the colours of objects, although the utilitarians or the proponents of evolutionary ethics are empirical in their approach.

In direct opposition to them are the subjectivists or

emotivists, who believe that the rightness or wrongness of actions depend on the thoughts and feelings of human beings. Right actions are actions which all or most people like or approve of whereas wrong actions are disliked or disapproved of.

The relativists take a different stand and put forward the view that the notions of right and wrong have differed in different periods of history and in different societies, though they have a relative objectivity within their frames of reference. The sceptics on the other hand claim that we cannot know anything regarding the nature of right and wrong, while logical positivists have dismissed ethical concepts as pseudo-concepts.

A positivist who says that they “reject the subjectivist view” states his point of view as follows: “The propositions which describe the phenomena of moral experience, and their causes, must be assigned to the science of psychology, or sociology. The exhortations to moral virtue are not propositions at all, but ejaculations or commands which are designed to provoke the reader to action of a certain sort” (A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1958, pp. 103–104).

Modern analytic philosophers are evolving a more satisfactory analysis of ethical propositions, although this is by no means perfect as yet.

What is the position of Buddhism regarding ethical propositions and the notions of right and wrong? Is the

Buddhist account objective, subjective, relativist, sceptical, positivist or something totally different? Only a careful study of the analysis of right and wrong in the scriptures can reveal the Buddhist point of view, which appears to be different from all of the above theories, although it may be compared with some of them in certain respects.

We have already stated that it is a necessary condition of right actions (or wrong actions) that they should be performed within a context of relative freedom, despite the causal conditioning. According to Buddhist conceptions, another necessary condition, which differentiates right actions from wrong ones, is the motive and intentions with which they are done. Suppose a person gets hold of a knife and cuts open another's body. Is this a right action or a wrong action? Some modern Western philosophers, who try to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action by virtue of the observable characteristics of the action itself or its consequences without reference to motive or intention, would find it difficult to answer this question. It is the motive and intention, which make a tremendous difference to the nature of the act.

If the intention of the person was to injure or kill the other man and he was motivated by personal animosity, we would regard it as a wrong act (*akusala*). If, however, the intention was to prolong the other person's life by performing a surgical operation and he was motivated by a desire to be of service to a fellow man, then we would regard it as a right action (*kusala*). It is primarily the motive

and intention (*cetanā*), which determines whether the act was right or wrong.

According to the Buddha, it is the motive and intention, which ought to be a primary consideration in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action. But this is only a necessary condition and not a sufficient condition. Mere good intentions are not enough. The act must be performed as well before we can say whether a right action has been done. Besides, for the action to be a skilful (*kusala*) action, the act itself must be appropriate. Consider the case where a layman, who with the best of intentions gives his friend in an emergency a dose of medicine, which turns out to be poisonous because he gave the wrong dosage. Here he acted with the best of intentions and motives but did not do a totally skilful (*kusala*) act.

So in considering the skilfulness or rightness of an action one has to take into account not only the motive and intention but the nature of the act, the manner in which it was carried out, its consequences, the people it affected etc. It is good to give but “one should give with discrimination” (*viceyya dānaṃ dātabbam*), so that the most needy are benefited with the things that they most need. The motive and intention are, therefore, only a necessary condition in evaluating the rightness or wrongness of an action but there are other factors as well to be taken into account.

Predominant among these other factors is the tendency on the part of these right actions to bring about the ultimate

good of the individual as well as of society. So one of the main criteria of a right action concerns the question as to whether it constitutes the right means towards the realisation of the ultimate good. The ultimate good for each individual is the attainment of Nibbāna, a state of highest happiness, moral perfection, supreme realisation, utter freedom and perfect mental health. The ideal for one is, in fact, the ideal for all.

The question may be raised as to whether the quest for such a goal is not narrowly egoistic. The answer is that it is not so, unless the goal is misconceived. The quest for Nibbāna necessarily implies the practise of other-regarding virtues, such as selflessness (cāga) and benevolence (mettā). So although the personal quest for Nibbāna may appear to be egoistic it is a form of enlightened egoism, apart from the fact that the goal itself is permeated with selflessness. On the other hand, mere altruism may not be in the best interest of others. As the Buddha points out: “It is not possible for one who is stuck in the mud to help out another; it is only possible for one who is not stuck in the mud to help out another who is stuck in the mud. It is not possible for a man who has not saved himself to save another; it is only a man who has saved himself who can help save another” (M I 46). Such unenlightened altruism would be illustrated in the activity of a foolish person with good intentions, who wishes to help his friend without being able to do anything of value. So enlightened altruism necessarily involves self-regarding activity.

The Dhammapada therefore firmly says: “One should first establish oneself in what is proper: then only should one instruct others. Such a wise man is not liable to be reproached. As he instructs others, so should he act himself” (Dhp 158–159). What Buddhism recommends, therefore, is the ideal neither of ethical egoism nor of ethical altruism. It may be called the ideal of ethical universalism. As the Buddha says on one occasion: “There are these four persons in the world. What four? He who is bent neither on his own welfare nor on the welfare of others. He who is bent on the welfare of others but not his own. He who is bent on his own welfare but not of others, and he who is bent on the welfare of oneself as well as of others . . . He who is bent on the welfare of oneself as well as of others, is of these four persons the chief and best, topmost, highest and supreme” (A II 95).

This is why right actions tend to benefit not only oneself, but others as well. When we state the truth, for example, on certain occasions, it may not be of immediate benefit to us, though it would benefit the community. It is an action, therefore, which tends to bring about “the good and happiness of the multitude” (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*) and indirectly benefits us. No doubt we directly experience the reward of good conscience even if we derive no immediate material benefit by such an action. So in this sense, speaking the truth serves in the long run one’s own welfare as well as that of others.

Viewing the individual and the social goods separately, a

right action is, therefore, one which tends to bring about one's own ultimate good as well as contributes to the weal and welfare of society. The ten right actions (*dasa kusala kammā*), which have these characteristics are stated as follows: (1) He refrains from killing and abides full of mercy to all beings; (2) He refrains, from stealing and is honest and pure of heart; (3) He refrains from sexual misconduct and does not transgress the social mores (*cāritta*) with regard to sex; (4) He refrains from lying and is devoted to truth. On being summoned as a witness before an assembly or a court of law, he claims to know what he knows, he does not claim to know what he does not know, he claims to have seen what he saw and does not claim to have seen what he did not see; he does not utter a conscious lie for the sake of himself, for the sake of others or for some gain; (5) He refrains from slander and holds himself aloof from calumny. What he hears here, he repeats not there in order to cause factions among people. He is a peacemaker, who brings together those who are divided, delights in social harmony and makes statements which promote harmony; (6) He refrains from harsh speech and uses language that is civil and pleasant to hear; (7) He refrains from idle gossip and speaks at the right time in accordance with facts, what is meaningful, righteous and in accordance with the law; (8) He refrains from covetousness, does not covet another's property (and is generous at heart); (9) He refrains from ill will (and is benevolent); (10) He refrains from holding false views and holds the right philosophy of life, believing in the

reality of this world and the next, in moral recompense, moral obligations and values and in religious teachers who have led good lives and have proclaimed by their superior insight, the nature of this world and the next” (M III 47–52).

Right actions are, therefore, those which are instrumental in bringing about the ultimate good of one and all. Since happiness is one of the basic characteristics of this ultimate good, right actions are those which tend to promote the happiness of oneself as well as of others. But this happiness is not to be considered in isolation from moral perfection, realisation or knowledge regarding the nature of things, emancipation of mind, perfect mental health etc.

Another account of right actions from the standpoint of the individual ultimate good as the goal is the noble eight-fold path, consisting of right beliefs (*sammā ditṭhi*) etc. Here again, as the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (M III 71 ff.) points out, right effort (*sammā vāyāma*) is involved in trying to give up false beliefs. In dispelling these wrong beliefs and consciously adopting right beliefs as a basis for action, one is led by right awareness (*sammā sati*). These in turn, namely right beliefs, right effort, and right awareness help in the cultivation of the other factors of the path. Thus, right beliefs help the cultivation of right aspirations, which in turn promote right speech and right action. Right action makes for a right mode of livelihood. This helps right effort, which in turn furthers right awareness or right mindfulness, which results in right meditation until eventually they culminate in right understanding (*sammā ñāṇa*) and right

emancipation (*sammā vimutti*). So we see that right actions are right (*sammā*) in being the efficient means for the realisation of the good.

Wrong actions, on the other hand, constitute those that prevent or obstruct the realisation of the goal on the part of oneself and others (*attavoyābādhāya saṃvaṭṭati paravoyābādhāya saṃvaṭṭati*).

Although we said that right motives were a necessary condition of right action, we may note that they are included in the eight-fold path as right aspirations (*sammā saṅkappa*), so that all right actions could be defined as what are instrumental in bringing about the ultimate good.

Since right actions constitute a middle path (*majjhima paṭipadā*) between two extremes, these extremes constitute wrong means for the attainment of the goal. The actions constituting them are, therefore, wrong actions. One wrong means, constituting a set of wrong actions consists of causing pain to oneself (*attantapa*) or others (*parantapa*) or both. As the Buddha has shown in the Kandaraka Sutta (M I 539ff) ascetics who mortify the flesh, hunters, fowlers and robbers who cause pain and suffering to others, kings who practise penance and burden their subjects with the performance of wasteful and cruel sacrifices, all fall into the category of people who do these wrong actions by causing pain to oneself, others or both.

In the other extreme are those who recommend free indulgence in one's desires, saying, for example, that "there

is nothing wrong in indulgence in sensual pleasures" (*natthi kāmesu doso*; M I 305). Such persons, the Buddha says, enjoy limited pleasures in the present but because of their failure to see that indulgence gives diminishing returns by way of pleasure and results in our becoming slaves to our passions, undergo suffering later. The Buddha says in the Mahādhammasamādāna Sutta (M I 309) that those whose desires are strong are likely to achieve happiness in due course by restraining and curbing their desires in the present even at the cost of a little unhappiness. This exercise of restraint by the cultivation of one's emotions and meditative self-analysis is different from the mortification of the flesh. On the other hand, those whose desires are not strong, it is said, can easily achieve stable states of happiness by transforming themselves.

Right actions are right because they are based on a realistic understanding of man and nature, an awareness of the goal of human endeavour and of the correct means to realise it. Their rightness is to be judged by the nature of their motivation as well as the nature of their consequences. These consequences may be psychological or social and experiential in this life or in future lives.

In my talks on "Survival and Karma," I gave instances of the verifiable and verified personal consequences of such actions in future lives. In stating the karmic consequences of some of these wrong actions, the Buddha says that they tend to bring one's status down to sub-human levels of existence in subsequent lives but that if we are born among human

beings, then one is likely to experience certain consequences of these wrong actions. For instance, a habitual liar is likely to become the object of false accusations (A IV 247). One who gossips is not likely to be accepted at his word. One who drinks heavily is likely to be born insane. Elsewhere, it is said that these consequences are to be expected in this life itself. The heavy drinker is said to end his days as an alcoholic and an insane person (Sn 398). The Dhammapada says: "Speak not harshly to anyone for those thus addressed will in turn retort" (Dhp 133).

If right action is a means to the attainment of an end which is the ultimate good, the question arises as to whether the means must not themselves be good. Buddhism does not seem to hold that ends are means or means are ends or that the means to be adopted to attain a good end must themselves be wholly good. There is a definite goal to be achieved, which is called. "the end of unhappiness" (*dukkhass'anta*) or the "supreme state of happiness" (*parama sukha*).

It may be argued that a good end can only be attained by means wholly good. But the fact is that we are not wholly good (if we were there would be no necessity to attain the end) and not being wholly good and not having a clear conception of the goal we cannot perform actions which are "perfectly right" (*paramakusala*). Our right actions are, therefore, only approximations to what is perfectly right. It is only gradually that we refine them and doing so acquire clearer conceptions of the goal.

The desire for fame or happiness in this life or the desire to be born in a better state in the next life could provide the initial incentive for betterment. Even if we are developed enough to have our eyes on the goal we must have “the desire to attain the ineffable” (*chanda-jāto anakkhāte*, Dhṛ 218). “Desire is to be given up depending on desire” (*taṇhaṃ nissaya taṇhaṃ pahātabbaṃ*), namely the desire to end our self-centred desires. “Conceit is to be given up depending on the conceited wish (*mānaṃ nissaya mānaṃ pahātabbaṃ*) that I would attain the goal.” A minimum of imperfection is, therefore, involved in our initial and sustained efforts to reach the goal. As the Buddha points out in the Abhayarājakumāra Sutta, if a child has got something stuck in his throat, it may be necessary to cause a minimum of pain in order to get it out. Truth is not always pleasant and it is sometimes necessary to state unpleasant truths or remind ourselves of them in order to arouse others or emerge from our state of smug satisfaction.

The question may be raised as to how we may know that right actions are right and wrong actions wrong. One answer is that the Buddha and the arahants have personally verified the nature of these actions and their consequences, and that, in principle, we ourselves are in a position to do so.

Another answer that is often suggested is that our conscience tells us what is right and wrong. Theists hold that conscience is the voice of God, while psychologists and sociologists claim that conscience and guilt feelings are a

result of conditioning from our childhood through our parents and the society in which we are brought up. The Buddhist view of “conscience” is something between the two. The Buddha says in one place that when we state a falsehood knowingly, then “our conscience knows whether what we say is true or false” (*attā te purisa jānāti saccaṃ vā yadi vā musā*, A I 149).

The mind, according to Buddhism, has a prior origin to our present human life. It has undergone a lot of saṃsāric conditioning and so its guilt feelings and its sense of uneasiness in certain situations is due to this conditioning, which extends beyond this life into the past. Its judgment, therefore, as to the rightness or wrongness of our actions, is not to be ignored though it cannot always be trusted. Besides, the mind cleansed of its adventitious defilements, possesses certain extrasensory intuitive powers, so that “when one’s self is tamed it becomes a light to man” (*attā sudanto purisassa joti*).

There is another sense in which the “criterion of oneself” (*attūpamā*) may be employed in determining what is right and wrong. This is done extensively in the Anumāna Sutta. For example, if a person boasts about himself and declaims others, such a person would be disagreeable and repulsive to me. So if I behaved in this manner, I would likewise be disagreeable and repulsive to others. Such actions, which cause unpleasantness, would be generally disapproved of and be deemed wrong actions.

Sometimes we find the criteria for deciding what are wrong actions stated as follows: (1) My conscience reproaches me if I do it (*attā pi maṃ upavadeyya*); (2) the wise would disapprove of it after examination (*anuvicca viññū garaheyyuṃ*); (3) one would tend to be born in states of downfall as a result of doing it (*parammaraṇā duggati pāṭikaṅkhā*).

Therefore, while motives and consequences are the predominant factors, the dictates of our conscience and the approval and disapproval of the wise may also be taken into account. So in deciding what is right and wrong, we are ruled by our conscience (*attādhigateyya*), by what the world says (*lokādhigateyya*) and what the Dhamma states (*dhammādhigateyya*).

In the light of these findings, we shall explore the nature of Buddhist ethical theory as a whole in our next talk.

# V. The Ethical Theory of Buddhism

Analytic philosophy is the current fashion in the English-speaking world, When this school of philosophy uses the term “ethical theory,” it means nothing more than an analysis of moral language as it is found today among English-speaking peoples. Says one scholar: “fully adequate ethical theory would analyse and systematise the whole variety of linguistic performances and commitments that are embodied in the use of moral language” (George C. Kerner, *The Revolution in Ethical Theory*, Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 250).

Such an “ethical theory” obviously would not satisfy people who wish to know whether the nature of man, society and the universe makes a moral life possible for human beings, whether there are ends worth attaining and, if so, the proper means to attain them.

We see an attempt to meet this demand on the part of some Existentialist philosophers, who speak of “authentic living” as an end worth achieving and sometimes of the means of achieving it.

Marxists outwardly reject ethics. Apart from it being an adjunct of “bourgeois philosophy,” the workings of dialectical materialism and economic determinism would

make a moral life impossible or meaningless. The socialist state is a product of history and not of voluntary human action.

However, Marxists do make constant allusions and appeals to ethical values in their writings. The classless state is often considered an end worth attaining and as a means to it a proletarian revolution. So the proletarian revolution is also considered a relatively good end worth achieving and what is helpful for this purpose is deemed to be right or instrumentally good. The following paragraph from the Programme of the Communist Party of Russia, adopted at the eighth party congress (March, 1919) indicates the relevance of certain ethical traits (printed here in Italics) in bringing about a certain desirable goal, thought of as a relatively good end: “To bring about the victory of the world-wide proletarian revolution it is essential that there should be absolute and *mutual trust*, the most intimate *brotherly alliance*, and the highest possible cohesion of the revolutionary activities of the working class in the more advanced lands” (Nikolai Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, The University of Michigan Press 1966, p. 377).

Mao Tse-Tung’s interpretations of Marxism and Leninism are also often deeply coloured by ethical values, which derive from the altruistic ethics of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Consider, for example, the following passage from the *Little Red Book* “At no time and in no circumstances should a Communist place his personal interests first; he should

subordinate them to the interests of the nation and of the masses. Hence, selfishness, slacking, corruptions, seeking the limelight, and so on, are most contemptible, while selflessness, working with all one's energy, whole-hearted devotion to public duty, and quiet hard work will command respect" (*Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*, Bantam Books, 1967, pp. 153, 154).

Here we may note that "selfishness, slacking, corruption, seeking the limelight" are condemned as vices and some basically Buddhist virtues such as "selflessness, working with all one's energy etc." are commended as virtues to be cultivated.

Even the theists cannot strictly speak of ethics. The history of a theistic universe (being a creation of God) is foreknown in all its ramifications, since God is held to be omniscient. At the same time, God is also entirely responsible for it, being omnipotent. Besides, if a man happens to be good, it is often claimed to be due to the grace of God. So, considering man's predicament in a theistic world, the performance of ethical actions on his part is strictly an impossibility since everything is due to God's will and real human freedom is incompatible with a theistic determinism.

However, theists, too, inconsistently with their theory, proclaim an ethic. They recommend virtues to be cultivated and condemn vices, which are to be eliminated under threat of divine punishment.

According to Buddhism, the events of history, including

human actions, are not due to economic determinism or God's will. Economic factors, no doubt affect and condition human behaviour; and according to the Buddhist philosophy of society, the economic factor constitutes one of the predominant factors (along with the ideological factor) in bringing about social change. But it is not the only factor. Nor does it strictly determine human behaviour. Hereditary, environmental and psychological factors condition man's actions according to the Buddhist account of conditioned genesis (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), but still, man has within himself an element of initiative (*ārabbhā-dhātu*) or free will (*attakāra*), by the exercise of which he can make decisions, which make the future (including his own) different from what it would otherwise be.

This factor of freedom, along with human survival after death, and the correlation between moral acts and consequences (the good acts tending to bring about pleasant consequences and the evil acts unpleasant consequences) make individual moral responsibility a reality.

In fact, without survival and this correspondence between acts and consequences (which is known as karma in a Buddhist context), a religious ethic promoting moral and spiritual development would be impossible. Professor C. D. Broad, Knightbridge Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Cambridge, states this explicitly in one of his essays on science and religion. He says:

“I will begin by remarking that, in my opinion, it is

almost a sine qua non of any religious view of the world that some men at least should survive bodily death. I take it that one minimal demand of religion is that what we count to be the highest spiritual values shall not be merely ephemeral by-products of complicated material conditions which are fulfilled only occasionally in odd holes and corners of the universe, and are unstable and transitory when fulfilled. Another minimal demand is that there shall be at least rough justice, e.g. that evil deeds shall, in the long run, bring evil consequences on the doer of them, and not wholly or mainly on others. I do not see how either of these demands could be even approximately met if no man survives the death of his body ... Therefore, if science does make human survival impossible or very improbable, it does, in my opinion, deliver a fatal blow to all religion”  
(*Religion, Philosophy and Psychological Research*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953, pp. 234, 235).

It was also Sigmund Freud’s view that ethics would be disregarded if virtue was not rewarded. Since Freud disbelieved in survival he thought that if ethics was to serve any purpose at all, virtue should be rewarded in this life itself. He says in his work, *Civilisation and its Discontents*: “The variety of ethics that links itself with religion brings in at this point its promises of a better future life. I should imagine that as long as virtue is not rewarded in this life

ethics will preach in vain" (*The International Psycho-Analytic Library* No. 17, The Hogarth Press, 1957, p. 140).

As we tried to show in our talk on "The Basis of Buddhist Ethics," the factors of freedom, survival, karma and the ultimate good of Nibbāna makes the moral and spiritual life both possible and the most desirable in the world in which we live.

When we, therefore, speak of the ethical theory of Buddhism we cannot confine ourselves to an analysis of psychological and linguistic problems in ethics. Such analyses are, no doubt, relevant. Early Buddhism itself was known as the "philosophy of analysis" (*vibhajja-vāda*). It has forestalled some of the techniques of modern linguistic analysis and it would be possible to give the Buddhist analysis of the propositions of ethics. But we must not lose sight of the fact that Buddhism gives a positive account of the ends, both social and psychological, worth attaining and of the means of attaining them. We have already considered and given an account of the personal goal of the ultimate good. We shall examine the social goal of the ideal society and the conditions under which it is likely to be realised in our scrutiny of the social and political philosophy of Buddhism in our subsequent talks.

So an account of the ethical theory of Buddhism should indicate the ends to be achieved and the means of achieving them on the basis of the Buddhist theory of the nature and destiny of man in the universe. We have already done this

in our previous talks of this series. It must also describe the general nature of this ethical theory: Is it egoistic or altruistic? Is it relativistic or absolutistic? Is it objective or subjective? Is it deontological or teleological? Is it naturalistic or non-naturalistic?

Before we do this, we may mention that the modern tradition of analysis in philosophy started as a reaction against metaphysics and ethical theories, which were closely associated with such metaphysical theories. One such example would be the ethics of self-realisation taught by Professor F. H. Bradley of Oxford on the basis of his monistic metaphysics.

The Buddhist ethical theory is also based on its theory of reality but this theory of reality is not metaphysical in that it was, in principle, verifiable. It also does not commit the error of Kant, who tried to reconstruct his metaphysics on the basis of practical reason, when pure reason failed him. The Buddhist theory, for instance, does not say with Kant that "ought" implies "can," i.e., that human freedom somehow must be a fact because moral propositions are for all practical purposes true and significant. What Buddhism says is that since human freedom is a fact, along with such other facts as survival, kamma and Nibbāna, moral propositions are significant. The ethical theory of Buddhism presupposes its theory of reality. But this theory of reality is independently established in the light of verifiable evidence. So obscure metaphysical presuppositions do not come into the picture, as in the case of the classical ethical theories

based on metaphysical theories or assumptions.

We have already examined the question as to whether the Buddhist ethic was egoistic or altruistic. As we pointed out, it was a form of enlightened egoism or enlightened altruism, which could be best characterised as an ethical universalism. Of the four possible types—those who worked for their own good, for the good of others, neither or both—the Buddha held that the person who worked for the good of oneself as well as that of others was the best.

The Mahāyāna text *Sikṣāsamuccaya* also states that we should do good without distinction as to oneself or others: “When fear and pain are abhorrent to me as well as to others, what distinguishes my own self that I protect it and not others” (*yadā mama paresām ca bhayaṃ dukkhaṃ ca na priyaṃ, tadātmanaḥ ko viṣeṣo yattaṃ rakṣāmi netaraṃ, I*).

However, the texts often state that one should first try to better oneself before working for the general good. The Dhammapada states: “One should not, on the whole, hinder one’s own welfare at the cost of serving others; perceiving one’s own welfare, one should devote oneself to the sake of the general good” (166). The reason for this is twofold.

One cannot help others morally and spiritually very much unless one knows the art by one’s own experience. Besides, one is likely to be an object of reproach if one does not practise what one preaches. At the same time, moral betterment or promoting one’s own welfare is not possible without cultivating other-regarding virtues such as

selflessness and compassion. So the egoist must develop altruistic virtues for his own good, while the altruist must cultivate his own good before he can effectively help others.

Is the Buddhist ethical theory relativistic or absolutistic? The answer to this question is given in the Aggañña Sutta, where it is pointed out that society undergoes change from time to time and as a result, "what is reckoned immoral at one time (*adhamma-sammataṃ*) may be reckoned to be moral at another time" (D III 89). The Buddha also recognised the fact that conventions differed in different countries or under different social systems. This was why he permitted that the minor rules of the Order may be changed to suit the different social and historical contexts.

So moral conventions may differ from time to time or from country to country. As long as the general principles of morality were not violated, these variations in mores do not seriously alter the basic values observed. To this extent, relativism is recognised and not considered as undermining the objectivity of values. But, on the other hand, there could be "unrighteous epochs" or "unrighteous social orders" which in varying degrees violate the principles of morality, due to ignorance of the true nature and significance of moral values. In this respect, we can speak of better or worse social orders as well as the best. Life in those social orders, which violate the principles of morality, would involve a greater degree of unhappiness according to the degree to which such principles have been violated." So while denying absolutism and recognising relativism, the

objectivity of moral values is not denied.

If the objectivity of moral principles and values is recognised, the question may be raised as to the sense in which we may speak of their objectivity. Let us take an example. Buddhism holds, for instance, that drunkenness is an evil since it promotes one's own unhappiness as well as the unhappiness of others in due course. It also has its karmic consequence of making people insane or moronic in their subsequent lives. So a society in which drunkenness prevails is defective in this respect. The unpleasant psychological, social and karmic consequences of drunkenness would be there, irrespective of what the drunkard or his society may think of drunkenness or the habit of drinking. It may be that drunkenness is highly esteemed or approved of in such a society. But such opinions and attitudes would not in the least detract from the fact that drunkenness is objectively an evil. Its unpleasant consequences would be there whatever the people in that society or even the world at large may think or feel about drunkenness.

It is in this sense, namely that the consequences, psychological, social and karmic would be there in the case of moral and immoral actions, as the case may be, the values embodied in the moral judgments are objective irrespective of the mental attitudes of people, including the agent.

This is not to deny the subjective element of morality, namely our own attitudes about ethical actions, including

the reactions of our conscience. These attitudes and reactions may vary, though on the whole, right actions which tend to bring about pleasant consequences to the agent as well as to others in due course are commended or approved of, while wrong actions which tend to bring about unpleasant consequences psychologically and socially, are condemned or disapproved of. But there could be situations in which, as in the example about drunkenness cited above, when our commendation or approbation is misguided or mistaken. So while these subjective attitudes regarding morals are prevalent in society and, on the whole, give correct verdicts about the nature of moral values, they cannot always be trusted since the objective consequences determine the objectivity of the moral (or immoral) acts themselves.

We may next ask whether the ethical theory of Buddhism is deontological or teleological? A deontological theory of ethics is one in which the concepts of duty or obligation are of primary importance, while a teleological theory stresses the importance of motives and consequences.

The Buddhist theory appears to be teleological rather than deontological. It determines the nature of right and wrong actions in terms of motives and consequences rather than on the basis of their being done out of a sense of duty, regardless of consequences.

This does not, however, mean that it ignores duties and consequences. The Buddhist ethical theory considers it the

fundamental duty of man to strive to attain the ultimate good and a person who has attained it is deemed to have discharged all his obligations (*katakaraṇīyā*).

In the meantime, man in society has various duties to perform towards the various classes of people, with whom he is involved. The state, likewise, has certain duties to discharge towards its subjects, who are ultimately responsible for it. But all these duties become duties by virtue of the fact that they are right actions, which promote the “welfare and happiness of the multitude” (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*), Yet they, too, should be performed not out of a cold sense of duty but as far as possible out of a desire for selfless service, love (compassion) and understanding. This is not to deny that actions done with goodwill and with no expectation of reward are deemed to be better than those performed with the hope of egoistic rewards in this life or the life to come. Ultimately, the perfect person acts out of a spontaneous sense of selflessness, love and understanding and not out of any sense of duty or expectation of earthly reward or divine glory.

So the ethical theory of Buddhism is one of ethical universalism, which recognises the relativity of and the subjective reactions regarding moral values without denying their objectivity to be measured in terms of the motives with which the acts are done as well as their psychological, social and karmic consequences. It is teleological rather than deontological in character.

Lastly, we may briefly examine the Buddhist analysis of ethical propositions. Ethical propositions are of various sorts. Let us take a few standard examples. Take the statements, “Nibbāna is the ultimate good,” “Puṇṇa was a good monk” and “It is right to refrain from slander which causes divisions, and to make statements which promote harmony.” According to the Buddhist analysis, such propositions would have two components, a factual component and an emotive-prescriptive component. The factual component would be of primary importance since the validity of ethical propositions would depend on the truth or falsity of the statements comprising this component. The emotive-prescriptive component would only have a secondary significance.

When we say that “Nibbāna is the ultimate good,” the factual component consists of a statement of the characteristics (such as supreme happiness, moral perfection, ultimate realisation, utter freedom etc.), whose co-presence justifies the use of the epithet “the ultimate good” for Nibbāna. It is, in fact, by virtue of the presence of these characteristics that we designate Nibbāna as the ultimate good. It is a factual question as to whether characteristics are present or not. We cannot observe or verify the presence of “the ultimate good” apart from these characteristics.

The Buddhist, therefore, cannot agree with the Moorean analysis that “good” is an unique unanalysable, non-natural quality. Hence the Buddhist ethical theory is not non-

naturalistic. It is the same with the analysis of “good” in “Puṇṇa is a good monk.” It is the presence of certain observable and verifiable traits and qualities in Puṇṇa, which entitles us to describe him as “good” and not the presence of an unique natural quality, which we can intuit.

However, stating the factual component does not exhaust the meaning of the word “good.” There is an emotive-prescriptive component as well in the analysis of “good.” When I say that “Nibbāna is the ultimate good,” or that “Puṇṇa is a good monk,” I do not merely refer to the characteristics. I also show my appreciation and approval of them and try to evoke a similar attitude in others. It is this, which makes the meaning of “good” not purely descriptive but emotive and prescriptive as well.

If we take the other statement, we would have to make a similar analysis in terms of factual as well as emotive-prescriptive components. Accordingly, the factual component of the other proposition is that “the class of actions which consist of refraining from slander, which causes divisions, and of making statements, which promote harmony” (performed, no doubt, with a good motive) result in pleasant psychological, social and karmic consequences. Whether this is so or not, is a factual question. The emotive-prescriptive component consists of the fact that in calling such a pattern of behaviour a right action, I am, in addition to making certain factual claims, approving such an action and recommending the approval of such an action on the part of others. But the significance of this emotive-

prescriptive component is dependent on the truth of the factual component.

It follows from the above that the Buddhist ethical theory gives a naturalistic analysis of ethical propositions, while asserting that such an analysis does not fully exhaust the meaning of ethical propositions, since they contain emotive-prescriptive components as well.

# Notes

1. G. P. Malalasekera, “The Status of the Individual in Theravāda Buddhist Philosophy” in *The Status of the Individual in East and West*, Ed. Charles A. Moore, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1968, p. 73.
2. Walpola Rāhula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Gordon Fraser, 1959, pp, 54–55.
3. Translated in The **Wheel No. 98/99**.

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