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# A Companion to Ethics

*Edited by*

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 **BLACKWELL**  
*P u b l i s h e r s*

PART II

THE GREAT ETHICAL TRADITIONS

# 4

## Indian ethics

PURUṢOTTAMA BILIMORIA

### *Preamble*

IT IS often asked: 'Has there ever been "ethics" in India?' Can one meaningfully speak of "Indian ethics"? 'Isn't the idea of "ethics" a Western invention – like anthropology?' Or, alternatively, does not the Indian mystical and 'life-denying' world-view rule out the use of ethics? There is no gainsaying that the Indian tradition did concern itself with a quest for the 'morally good life' and the attendant principles, laws, rules, etc. that might help achieve this goal. And like their counterparts elsewhere, Indian thinkers did not shy away from enquiring into the nature of morality, of 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad', even if they went no further than describing or codifying the prevailing '*ethos*', mores, customs and habitual traditions – that is to say, giving expression to what in Sanskrit is termed *dharma*, meaning, very roughly, the moral and social order.

The questions we began with do, however, point to one difficulty, namely, that of locating in the Indian tradition the sort of ahistorical, abstract and formal theorizing in ethics that we have become accustomed to in the West. In India it was recognized that ethics is the 'soul' of the complex spiritual and moral aspirations of the people, co-mingled with social and political structures forged over a vast period of time. And this is a recurrent *leitmotif* in the culture's profuse wisdom literature, legends, epics, liturgical texts, legal and political treatises.

As with any other major civilization whose origins lie in antiquity, one can naturally expect there to be a variety of ethical systems within the Indian tradition. To cover all of these positions would be an impossible task. Also, to speak of 'Indian tradition' is to refer rather loosely to an incredibly diversified collection of social, cultural, religious and philosophical systems, which have also changed over time. The present discussion has to be selective and it will be confined to the Brahmanical–Hindu and Jaina traditions, concluding with a brief look at Gandhian ethics. (Buddhist ethics, whose Indian career would normally be part of such a chapter, is discussed in Article 5.) The use of Sanskrit terms is inevitable, in view of the lack of English equivalents (and vice versa), but they will be explained.

### *General remarks about early Indian ethics*

To start with the most general remark, the early Indian people in their practical moral judgements, placed on the side of the 'good': happiness, health, survival, progeny, pleasure, calmness, friendship, knowledge and truth; and on the side of

'bad' more or less their opposites or disvalues: misery or suffering, sickness and injury, death, infertility, pain, anger, enmity, ignorance or error, untruth, etc. And these are universalized for all sentient beings. for it is thought that the highest good is possible when the whole world can enjoy the good things the cosmos has to offer. The highest good, however, is identified with the total harmony of the cosmic or natural order, characterized as *rita*: this is the creative purpose that circumscribes human behaviour. The social and moral order is thus conceived as a correlate of the natural order. This is the ordered course of things, the truth of being or reality (*sat*) and hence the 'Law' (*Rigveda* 1.123: 5.8).

One therefore does that which is consistent with, or which promotes, the good so perceived, and desists from doing that which produces the bad things or effects, so that overall the *order* is not unduly disturbed. One may also attempt to prevent or overcome the untoward effects of certain actions. An act is therefore right if it conforms to this general principle, and an act is wrong if it contravenes it, and hence is *anrita* (disorder) (*Rigveda* 10.87.11). Since to do what is right safeguards the good of all qua *rita* (the factual order), it is assumed that it is more or less obligatory to do or perform the right acts (the 'ought' or moral order). This convergence of the cosmic and the moral orders is universally commended in the all-embracing category of *dharma*, which becomes more or less the Indian analogue for ethics.

'Right' or rightness is identified with 'rite', i.e. it is formalized as ritual, with varying content. In other words, the obligation derived from a value, say, survival of the race, becomes the value itself, e.g. sacrifice, regardless of what is offered in the act. Rite now comes to possess an intrinsic moral worth. But it also assumes a power all its own, and people are disposed to pursuing rites or rituals for egoistic ends. One group may claim entitlement and therefore advantage over others as to the prescribed rites, their content, correct performance, utility, and so on. This leads to the working out of differential duties and moral codes for the different groups in the larger social complex. Differentiation is superimposed on the organic unity of nature and individuals alike.

What counts as *ethics*, then, although in appearance naturalistic, is largely normative; the justification usually is that this is the 'divined' ordering of things, and hence there is a tendency also to absolutize the moral law.

That is not, however, to say that genuine issues, concerns and paradoxes of ethical relevance do not get raised, even if these appear to be couched in religious, mythical or mythological terms. To give an illustration: scriptures prescribe avoidance of flesh; but a priest would wrong the gods if he refuses to partake of a certain ritual offering involving an animal. With the gods wronged, *order* can't be maintained: which then should he do? (Kane, 1969, I. 1.) Here we are led into an ethical discussion. What we have sketched above is, admittedly, a sweeping account that basically covers the very early period (c. 1500–800 BCE), during which time the Brahmanical tradition grew and flourished. This also outlines a broad framework for looking at how moral consciousness, various ethical concepts and often competing moral schemes develop and become articulated in later periods, which we may identify as the 'Hindu' ethical tradition.

## i Brahmanical–Hindu ethics

First we shall make three concrete observations about the Brahmanical society.

1 The Vedas, the canonical collection of texts, is its ultimate authority. There is no one 'Supreme Revealer' who is the source of the scriptures. Their contents are simply 'seen' or 'heard' (*shruti*); and the principles invoked are embodied in the gods, who are models for human conduct.

2 A particular principle of social ordering is adopted (probably introduced in India by Aryans around 1500 BCE), according to which society is organized into a functional division of four 'classes', called *varna* (literally, 'colour'). These are, with their respective tasks:

<i>brahmana</i> (brahmin)	religious, instructional
<i>kshatriya</i>	sovereign, defence
<i>vaishya</i>	agriculture, economic
<i>shudra</i>	menial, labour

Ideally, the sources of power are distributed justly at different places; and also, differences in function need not entail differences in interests, rights and privileges. But the outcome in practice appears to be otherwise. A system of subdivisions or 'castes' (*jati*) further complicates the class functions, gradually turning them into a discriminatory institution based on birth. The brahmins profit most from the system and they hold the power-base. A life-affirming but rigidly authoritarian morality develops. Because of this, Max Weber judged that the Vedas 'do not contain a rational ethic' (Weber, 1958, pp. 261, 337).

3 Despite the overall ritualistic worldview, the Vedic hymns do praise certain humanistic virtues and moral ideals, such as truthfulness (*satya*), giving (*dana*), restraint (*dama*), austerities (*tapas*), affection and gratitude, fidelity, forgiveness, non-thieving, non-cheating, giving others their just desert, and avoiding injury or *himsa* to all creatures. (*Rigveda*, 10; vedas, *Atharvaveda*, 2.8.18–24; cf. Kane, 1969, I.1:4.)

### Classical Hindu ethics

Vedic authority becomes normative in the later periods; the Vedas, which now extend beyond hymns and rituals, are invoked as the source or as symbols of ethics. Another important institution, *ashrama*, and two morally significant concepts, namely, *dharma* and *karma* emerge, and these culminate in the ethical concept of *purusharthas* (ends), which are all central to classical Hindu ethics, as we shall now describe.

*Ashrama* (life-cycle). Life is conceived as progressing through four relative stages in concentric circles, each with its own codes of conduct. Namely, *studentship*, requiring discipline, continence and dedication to the teacher; the *householder* stage, entailing marriage, family, and their obligations; the *semi-retreat* stage, entailing gradual withdrawal from worldly pursuits and pleasures; and *renunciation*, leading to total withdrawal and contemplation. The last stage marks the

preparation for final liberation and shedding of egoistic as well as altruistic tendencies, since the renunciant has to exercise extreme disinterestedness. It also involves breaking with the customary patterns of family and society and becoming an autonomous individual.

*Dharma* (duty). *Dharma*, as we said, is an all-embracing conception and is perhaps unique to Indian thought. But the term is also rather diffuse as it has many and varying meanings, beginning with 'fixed principles' in the Vedas and ranging from 'ordinance, usage, duty, right, justice, morality, virtue, religion, good works, function or characteristics' to 'norm', 'righteousness', 'truth' and much else (Kane, 1969, I.1: 1-8). The word is derived from the Sanskrit root *dhr*, meaning to form, uphold, support, sustain, or to hold together. It certainly connotes the idea of that which maintains, gives order and cohesion to any given reality, and ultimately to nature, society and the individual. As will be noticed, *dharma* takes over from the Vedic idea of organic unity (*a lá rita*) and shifts more towards the human dimension. In this respect it parallels Hegel's idea of *Sittlichkeit* (the actual ethical order that regulates the conduct of the individual, family, civil life, and state) more than it does Kant's ideal conception of the Moral Law. Nevertheless, to a Hindu *dharma* suggests a 'form of life' whose sanction lies beyond individual and even group or collective preferences.

Law makers brought the notion of *dharma* more down to earth by devising a comprehensive system of social and moral regulations for each of the different groups, subgroups (caste, rulers, etc.) within the Hindu social system, as well as specifying certain universal duties incumbent on all. Vocational niches, duties, norms, and even punishments are differently arranged for different groups, and the roles and requirements also vary in the different *life-cycle* stages for the different groups. Thus, while the wife of a 'twice-born' (the three higher classes) may take part in certain Vedic rites, a *shudra* (toiler) would be risking punishment if he or she so much as hears the Vedas recited – to say nothing of those who fall outside the class-caste order, and aliens like us! (Manu, 2.16, 67; 10.127.)

More often than not though, *dharma* is invoked as though it were an objective possibility, when in fact it merely gives an overall form to a system of positive law, mores and regulations which are cultural imperatives, the contents of which are determined by various factors, more particularly the voice of tradition, convention or custom, and the conscience of the learned. *Dharma* then provides a 'frame' for what is ethically proper or desirable at any one time. What gives coherence to the conception itself is perhaps its appeal to the need to preserve the organic unity of being, to 'make' justice where justice is due, and to minimize the burden of *karma*, if not also to free the individual from its encumbrances. But what do we understand by the concept of *karma*?

*Karma* (action-effect). The basic idea here is that every conscious and volitional action an individual engages in generates conditions for more than the visible effect, such that the net effect of an action *X* may manifest itself at a later time, or perhaps its traces remain in the 'unconscious' and get distributed over another time. *X* may combine the residual effect of *Y* to generate a compounded effect in

some future moment. And this in turn becomes a determinant of another action, Z, or a state of affairs pertaining to that particular individual (perhaps even a collective). The effect of Z might be pleasurable (*sukha*) or it might be painful and induce suffering (*dukkha*), but this is the retribution entailed in the causal network that is itself an inexorable manifestation of *dharma*.

Further, the idea of an infinite possibility of action-retribution suggests to the Indian mind the idea of rebirth, for merit or virtue appears to be in need of being rewarded, and demerit punished, according to the Law of Karma. Thus merit or demerit achieved in one lifetime could well continue to determine one's capacities, temperament and circumstances in another birth. Hindu thought generally espouses the idea of a more substantial theory of rebirth, meaning that something like the 'soul' carries with it the latent potential (*karma*) of all that constitutes the person. However, some Hindu philosophers, such as Shankara (eighth century CE) do away with the idea of a permanent self by asserting the identity of the individual self, *atman*, with the ultimate reality, *Brahman*; hence what really transmigrates is something nearer to an illusory self, which has lost sight of its true identity, namely its oneness with *Brahman*.

The linkage of *dharma* and *karma* (action-effect) has the following consequences: there are no 'accidents of births' determining social iniquities; mobility within one lifetime is excluded; one has one's *dharma*, both as endowment and as a social role (Creel, 1984, p. 4). One either accumulates an improvement in *karma* aiming towards a higher, re-birth, or one tries to cut the Gordian knot and opts to step off, once and for all, the wheel of cyclical existence (*samsara*). But this is not achieved as simply as it is willed. Indeed, this freedom is placed as the fourth and the most difficult of goals in the scheme of the fourfold deontological ends of *purusharthas*, literally, 'things sought by human beings'.

*Purushartha* (human ends). According to the Hindu view, there are four pursuits in life which are of intrinsic value, namely: *artha*, material interests; *kama*, pleasure and affective fulfilment; *dharma*, again, social and individual duties; and *moksha*, liberation. They may or may not be continuous with each other, though one goal might prove to be of instrumental value for achieving another; *dharma* is often thought to be of instrumental value in connection with liberation. Thus an ascending scale might be admitted, and the fixing of the relative status of each could lead to vigorous debate, as it has in Indian philosophy.

What is significant is that the above conception of human ends provides the context and criteria for determining the rules, conduct and guidelines in respect of the institutes of class and life-cycle stages. For an individual will want to strive towards achieving the best in terms of these ends within the limits of his or her temperament, circumstances, status and so on. Sometimes it is a question of balance; at other times it is a question of which interests get priority.

For example, a brahmin in the semi-retreat stage might consider that he has discharged all his family and social obligations, so that his remaining interest is to edge towards liberation, by becoming a full-time renunciant. What he should do and what he should not do in pursuit of this end is left entirely to his own

determination, for which he relies on his meditative and cognitive insights. His particular *dharma* is the correlate of his innate constitution, of which he alone is the master: thus an inward-attentive praxis is the source of the principles for his ethic. Here, it may be observed, the gap between intuition and ethics is very nearly closed over. This is another salient feature of Indian ethics.

### *Upanishadic ethics*

The *Upanishads* (post 500 BCE), perhaps the key philosophical texts of the Hindus, presuppose in principle the authority of the earlier Vedas (while being cynical regarding Vedic ritualism with its promises for utilitarian returns, such as cows and progeny), however, develop this alternative scheme with much finesse for a more universal application. Here metaphysical knowledge is placed above worldly pursuits. But this scheme also allows for the possibility of, indeed encourages, a detached and asocial pursuit of spiritual ends removed from the challenges of the world.

That this tendency develops in the hands of yogis and ascetics, and that it influences Indian ethical thinking cannot be denied. It appears almost as though *dharma* could be dispensed with. As the virtuoso Yajñavalkya, justifying his hasty decision to leave behind his wealth, home and two wives, puts it: It is not for the sake of the husband, wife, sons, wealth, gods, Vedas, brahminhood, kshatriyahood, etc., that these are dear, but for the sake of the Self, all these are the Self, one knows all in the Self ... Work cannot increase nor diminish the greatness of this knowledge (*Bṛihadaranyaka Upanishad* 5.5.6–7; 4.4.24). Virtue is deemed necessary for knowledge, and the Socratic dictum, 'knowledge is virtue' rings through here also. The ideal Upanishadic person is expected to overcome emotions, feelings, inclinations and sentiments in pursuit of a higher, nonetheless self-centred, 'calling'. But there are few rules.

It is, however, just for these sorts of reason that there have been charges, from within and without the tradition, that all we have here is an ethically bankrupt, quietistic and mystically-grounded morality (Danto, 1972, p. 99). At least this is what is said of the Vedānta and Yoga systems.

True as this charge might be, there is a list of three comprehensive virtues extolled in the *Upanishads* (and familiar to readers of T. S. Eliot) which is worthy of mention, namely, '*damyata, datta, dayadhvam*', signifying, self-restraint, giving or self-sacrifice, and compassion. But again, there are no rules other than exemplars, and no virtues to worry about after attaining liberation. Still, one moral ramification of the Upanishadic worldview is that all life, as indeed the whole world, is to be looked upon as a whole, where the ego sets aside its own narrow self-interests and even effaces itself.

### *Smarta ethics*

There occur parallel and subsequent developments among the more doctrinaire and legalistic advocates of the rule of *dharma*, in what we shall call *smarta* (derivative) ethics. The school of Mīmāṃsā champions a rigidly categorical reading of the scriptural imperatives. The implication is that all duties – religious as well

as secular – could be divided into those that are optional or prudential and those that are obligatory, and that all ensuing actions are instrumental towards some result or end (even if not indicated). But if there is a mandate one does it out of a sense of obligation. The Mimamsa developed the thorough going hermeneutic of *dharma* for which the school is best known, and which proved instructive for later ethical and legal discourses.

The more populist texts known as *Dharmashastras*, of which the most relevant are Manu's 'Law Books' and Kautilya's treatise on politics, overstress the legalistic side (Manu, 1975; Kane; 1969). Thus Kautilya (c. 200 CE) justifies the rigid reign of the 'rod' (*danda*) wielded by the king on the grounds that unless there are calculated controls the (natural) law of the small fish being swallowed by the big fish would prevail. Jurisprudence, ordinances for regulating civil life, and the governance and security of the state are his chief objectives. But he also highlights the use of reasoning (*anvikshiki*) in the study and deliberation on these matters (Kane, 1969, I.1:225) Both he and Manu make it mandatory for the king to attend first to the welfare of the citizens, and they seek to protect the rights and interests of the individual within a group framework, although not in the most egalitarian manner. Manu even admits that there are different *dharmas* in different epochs, which is suggestive of relativity in ethics (Manu, 1975, I, 81–86). Manu decrees some ten virtues, namely contentment, forgiveness, self-restraint, non-anger, non-appropriating, purity, sensual-control, wisdom, self-knowledge, and truth. Again, these are common to Indian ethics.

### *The Epics and the Gita*

The popular epics of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, through their moving narratives and anecdotes, explore the struggles, paradoxes and difficulties of coming to grips with the evolving idea of *dharma*. The *Ramayana*, which presents the heroic Rama and his chaste wife Sita as the paragons of virtue, is somewhat dogmatic on its stance of 'righteousness', while the voluminous *Mahabharata* is less sanguine about exactness in matters of duty, as it turns over every conceivable ethical stance the culture has hitherto known. For instance, the sage Kaushika, who in the *Mahabharata* courts censure for his insistence on telling the truth to a bandit – because it leads to the killing of an innocent man – might well be acclaimed in the *Ramayana* for his uncompromising adherence to principle – as Rama indeed is for giving priority to his father's promise over his royal and family obligations.

The *Bhagavad Gita*, however, which is part of the *Mahabharata*, appears to be more decisive in its ethical pronouncements and perhaps for that reason has had an extraordinary impact on the modern Hindu–Indian mind. The *Gita* locates itself in the middle of two opposing traditions: *Nivritti* (abstinent), the austere path of anti-action (echoing non-Vedic asceticism), and *Pravritti* (performative), the doing of social and moral duties. Each had ethical ramifications for its time and their respective codes and rules were in competition and conflict.

While the *Gita* is recognized for the ingenuity with which it raises a host of

ethical issues (e.g., should I kill my own kin for the sake of regaining my rightful sovereignty?), its judgements have not satisfied all and sundry. The deep conflict of traditions is resolved through a synthesis of asceticism and duty in the unique concept of *nishkama karma* or disinterested action. What this implies is that one does not forsake one's apportioned duties but performs them in complete disregard of their fruits or consequences. Action is a universal necessity, and the individual has a 'right' (*adhikara*) only to the performance of the action and not to its fruit (2.47). The argument is that it is not acting that enslaves, but rather the thought that one is the cause, the agent and enjoyer of the act; stripped of this linear causal thinking no action can be binding on the self, which is *free* to start with.

This *disinterested action* ethics might look somewhat like Kant's ethic of 'duty for duty's sake', or acting from respect for the Law (hence the Categorical Imperative), but the precise rational-universalizable formulation of Kant is absent here. The *Gita*'s motivation is not so much to make the 'Good Will' the determinant of moral actions but to conserve the Brahmanical cultural base (its performative ideal) while integrating the threatening asocial ethic of ascetic renunciation, and also accommodating the influence of a nascent devotionism, with its theistic orientation. The *Gita*'s ethics is both formal and material: one must do one's duty according to one's 'nature'; but this duty is determined by virtue of the individual's place in the larger social whole, i.e. by dint of the class he or she finds himself belonging to. Thus the maxim: better one's duty (though) imperfect, than another's duty well-performed (3.35). As to the specific content of the duty and the criterion by which its validity is to be judged, the text remains largely obscure. Nonetheless, the promise of liberation lies in disinterestedly pursued action, and a crude 'work ethic' (*karmayoga*), rid of egoism, is suggested, which might appear to justify prescribed ritual activity (sacrifice, austerities and giving) (18.5) and killing alike (18.8).

But the *Gita* does not overlook the significant role that a quasi-rational discerning faculty plays in such a process. For this it develops the *yogas* (paths) of *buddhi* or intelligent-willing and *jnana* or knowledge ('*gnosis*'). That the 'will' could at once be intelligent and practical (i.e. socially-attuned), making for its moral autonomy, is itself an interesting idea canvassed here. Apart from these teachings, truth, continence and non-violence (*ahimsa*), (16.2; 17.14) as well as 'welfare of all' (*lokasamgraha*) and 'desiring the good of every living creature' are underscored in the *Gita* (3.20; 5.25). The *Gita*'s model of an ethical person, in Krishna's words, is one who is:

without hatred of any creature, friendly and compassionate without possessiveness and self-pride, equable in happiness and unhappiness ... who is dependent on nothing, disinterested, unworried ... and who neither hates nor rejoices, does not mourn or hanker, and relinquishes both good and evil.

(12.13-17)

But as to why one should follow these principles, and what one should do if the consequences of one's action or duty are detrimental to the interests of another, the *Gita* seems to have little to say. (Cf. Rama Rao Pappu, 1988.) Also, if good

and evil are transcended and the distinction obliterated can there any longer be an ethic to speak of? (Can we each be like Nietzsche's Superman?) Modern Indian reformers, such as Gandhi, have tried to fill in some of the lacunae in the traditional ethical teachings, symbolized in the *Gita*. But before that we'll look at another, contrasting, Indian ethical system.

## ii Jaina ethics

One of the lesser known ethical traditions of India is that of the Jainas. Jainism, which is both a philosophical system and a way of life in its own right, was founded around 500 BCE by Mahavira, an ascetic and unorthodox teacher thought to be a contemporary of the Buddha, to whom he is often compared. Jainism is decidedly non-theistic, rejecting, like Buddhism, belief in a 'supremely personal God'. Very early on a dispute and rift arose over the charge that Jainas had concerned themselves far too much with individual morality and monastic life. This gave way to two distinct Jaina sects, the Digambaras (non-clad) and Shvetambaras (white-clad); the latter shifting towards a more pragmatic approach to lay life in contrast to the strictly austere life continued by the former.

The source of Jaina teachings is identified with a much older ascetic group of 'great teachers' (*tirthankaras*) called Nirgranthas. Their teachings were codified and systematized in canonical texts known as *Nigantha pavayana*, most of which are no longer extant (Jaini, 1979, p. 42). The basic philosophic belief of the Jainas is that every entity in the world has *jiva* or a sentient principle, whose distinguishing feature is consciousness along with vital energy and a happy disposition. The idea is that consciousness is continuous and nothing in the universe is without some degree of sentience at varying levels of conscious and apparently unconscious existence, from its more developed form in adult human beings to invisible embryonic modes at 'lower' animal and plant levels. (Here sentience is not determined merely by pain-pleasure responses.)

Each and every sentient principle however, subsists in a contingent relation to the quantity of *karma*, which is described as a 'nonconscious immaterial' *matter* of the most subtle form that determines the relative nature of the being. Activity, of both volitional and non-volitional kinds, induces *karma* and by association conditions the development of the sentient being, resulting in the eventual death and reembodyment of the particular 'soul'. If *karma* can be prevented and exhausted the bondage could be broken, the cyclical process arrested, and the sentient principle could grow to its fullest possible realization – a belief Jainism shares with much of Hindu and Buddhist thought (Jaini, 1979, pp. 111–14).

The ethical implication of this 'spiritual' worldview is that there has to be a rigid discipline of renunciation, which entails an individual and a collective mode of life, *dharma*, conducive to this principle. A monastic community (*samgha*) is the preferred model, although a social life that aims to maximize this principle in a secular environment is acceptable. The life of a monk, particularly of an *arhant*, a philosopher-ascetic, who through his stoic practices has attained a 'near-omniscient' state, becomes the normative standard for the layperson, who would

have to be born as a monk in the next round to attain that glorious final liberation (*moksha*) which is the end of Jaina life. Thus the duties of the layperson in civil life are derived, with due concessions and modifications, from those observed by the monk in a monastic *samgha*. But this rules out the possibility of an independent social ethics, for as with Hindu Yoga, self-culture and personal 'salvation' take priority over all else. Paradoxically, this end is not attainable without the annihilation of all self-interest and self-centred desires and inclinations. The sentient principle in that state is both disinterested and inactive. It goes without saying that for the Jaina all ethics is perceived by reference to monastic ethics.

The Jaina ethical life becomes almost synonymous with the observance of a list of vows and austerities, and abstention from useless and untoward activities. But the Jainas gave no real reasons why a certain practice X, e.g. the painful uprooting of every hair from the body, is deemed essential to an ascetic life, save to say that hair represents pleasure. So all pleasure is evil, and pain is at least endurable: which in effect turns classical utilitarianism on its head! The practical manual of Jaina ethics defines right conduct in terms of the observance of vows of restraint, progressively geared towards the complete renunciation of the ascetic. This is their axiological scheme. There are five such 'vows', namely, *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya*, *apigraha*, which we shall describe briefly.

*Ahimsa* refers to non-injury or non-harming of sentient beings and is perhaps the most fundamental concept of Jaina ethics. With its broad understanding of sentience, Jaina ethics inevitably reflects an uncompromising 'reverence for all life'. The restraints comprise rigid dietary habits, such as non-consumption of meat, alcohol, and foods of certain kinds, and rules against the abuse, ill-treatment, exploitation, etc. of all 'breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures'. There are prohibitions against injurious treatment of animals, such as beating, mutilating, branding, overloading and deprivation of food and space. Meat-eating is strictly prohibited on the grounds that this requires killing of animals.

These concerns make the Jainas among the earliest protagonists of 'animal liberation' and they surpassed the Hindus and Buddhists on this moral stance and in expounding vegetarianism (Jaini, 1979, p. 169). Furthermore, Jainas were so sensitive to the killing, both intentional *and* accidental, of living matter that they would strain water to avoid drinking any creatures that might be in it, brush ants and insects from the path, and wear masks over the mouth to prevent minute '*nigodas*' (fungus-like entities) from being inhaled. The logical extreme of this ethic would be to curtail all movement and starve oneself (to death), as indeed some Jaina monks did – a sure antidote to eudaimonism! In cases of extreme or terminal illness, this practice may also be opted for by a Jaina.

One important qualification, however, has to be noted here. While the vow of *ahimsa* or non-injury may appear to have been practised on altruistic grounds, the concern here is as much with the motive of avoiding injury or harm to *oneself*, which could occur through any number of actions, not just in acts that lead to the suffering of others. Thus if one told lies this could be harmful to oneself for it hinders the development of one's 'soul'. Thus a Jaina monk will maintain silence where lying to the bandit could well save the life of his innocent prey. A layperson,

however, may be inclined to place the interest of the victim above his or her own minimally threatened interest. This rather negatively articulated virtue has had an influence on the wider Indian ethical tradition.

The other vows pertain to being truthful (*satya*); not appropriating what is not one's own (*asteya*); exercising sexual continence (*brahmacharya*) – which legitimizes the institution of marriage for the laity; and non-possessiveness (*api-graha*), which encourages disinterested dealings in daily life. Fasting, giving alms, forgiveness, compassion and kindness towards others are some of the positive virtues that are encouraged. It could be said that the question of 'rights' and interests of others is not raised, except marginally under *ahimsa* (non-injury), for the ultimate justification for all ethical practices is that they should raise the moral stature of the practitioner, not necessarily of others. One even pardons another for this reason. In the stark absence of other beings, a lonesome Jaina might not accumulate much meritorious *karma*! Sometimes monks appeal to adverse social consequences to explain the evils of the non-observance of vows, but such prudential and utilitarian considerations are merely expedient rationalizations rather than their justification.

It has been claimed, somewhat contentiously, by some modern writers that virtues such as *ahimsa* have intrinsic value and that their justification lies in their being derived, not from objective facts (such as 'life is dear'), but from some experience which is self-evident. What is 'right' is in harmony with this experience. *Ahimsa*, in their example, is an experience related to the occurrence of pain and suffering among living beings and is universalized for others from one's own experience of pain. *Ahimsa* stands as the 'good' to which other values tend (Sogani, 1984, p. 243).

Overall, one gets the sense that Jaina ethics strives to be autonomous; it is not naturalistic but normative, and it admits the possibility of objective values, of which *ahimsa* seems to be its most significant and distinctive contribution.

### iii Gandhian ethics

M. K. Gandhi, or Mahatma Gandhi as he is popularly known, is all but forgotten in India; and yet he, more than most in recent times, has struggled to advance Indian ethics beyond the pale of its apparently diminishing relevance in a modern, civilizing, world. Perhaps Gandhi doesn't have much to offer as an ethical theoretician. But, it is said, his genius lay in his practical wisdom, especially his ability to take an idea from a traditional practice or context (e.g. fasting) and apply it to contemporary issues or situations, whether on dietary matters or in an act of civil disobedience. For this he would attract criticism from both traditionalists and modernists alike.

Gandhi led a nationalist struggle against British sovereignty in India, which sparked off a spate of anti-colonial movements throughout the globe. The way or means by which he was able to achieve this feat, and how this ties in with the particular ethics he gave voice to, is particularly significant. That in the process he also ended up questioning many of the traditional (Hindu) values and customary

practices, as well as a host of modern (Western) values, though perhaps not overturning them, is also significant. So, for example, he grew up a vegetarian on customary Hindu grounds; but after a short lapse he switched his moral justification for vegetarianism to ethical consideration for animals.

Gandhi is a curious mix of the radical and the conservative. For example, he takes up the cause of civil rights in South Africa, but his struggle does not extend much beyond rights for the Indian community. Still, he set an example of 'civil resistance' which some Black leaders and their Christian sympathizers of the time followed. Returning to India, Gandhi is much anguished by the injustices of the caste, class and religious divisions that had taken deep root in the Indian society. He becomes a champion of the cause of the 'untouchables', whom he gives the name *Harijan* (People of the Lord), and he rails against the prejudices and 'the evils of the caste system'. It looks as though Gandhi is set to have the entire structure dismantled.

In the long run, however, Gandhi defends the *varna* class structure, on the grounds that it is (1) different from the divisive caste system, (2) a sensible scheme for demarcation of work, (3) a law of human nature, and hence part of *dharma*. What he doesn't find agreeable is the inordinate privileges one class, especially the brahmin, has arrogated to itself. Inequality, he thinks, is not an issue in the design, but it becomes a problem when the structure gets tilted vertically (Gandhi, 1965, pp. 29, 80.) The enigma of *dharma* oddly places constraints on the otherwise splendid idea of civil and human rights that Gandhi awakens to rather early in his career; but it also helps him forge a principle of human action which itself has buttressed the struggle for rights of one kind or another in different quarters. That principle is non-violent action or, as Gandhi also called it, *ahimsa*.

Gandhi first toys with non-co-operation, an idea which he discovers in Tolstoy and Henry Thoreau, and which is reinforced by his Quaker friends in South Africa. It underpins the idea of 'non-resistance' (or 'resist not evil'), meaning the renunciation of all opposition by force, when faced with evil, injustices and oppression. Gandhi initially calls this 'passive resistance'; although he modifies his strategy, and coins a new term, *satyagraha* ('truth-force'), which he says better reflects the Indian basis of this technique. What this implies is that Gandhi, no longer content with simply 'turning the other cheek' or just withholding taxes and obligations, or advocating 'go slow', looks for a method by which to bring the adversary to (1) confront the situation and meet 'eye-to-eye' on the issue in dispute, and (2) redress the evil or wrong without coercing or inflicting injury or violence onto the other party.

In developing this method, what Gandhi does in effect is to combine three cardinal notions that had long currency in Hindu, Jaina and Buddhist ethics, namely, *satya*, *ahimsa*, and *tapasya*. The last of these came up in our discussion of the austere practices associated with asceticism (*tapas*, 'spiritual heat'). For Gandhi this concept provides a framework for the cultivation of courage, fortitude, stamina and most importantly *disinterestedness* (here invoking the *Gita*), necessary for the successful deployment of the ensuing technique.

*Satya* has to do with 'truth', but truth in three senses, namely, of being truthful,

the truth of knowledge and the truth of being or reality. Its original sense is of course derived from *sat*, which means the 'IS' of existence, the really existent truth; whether this is identified with Non-being, Brahman, *Nirvana*, or God is a matter for philosophy to determine. For Gandhi *Truth* is God, by which he means we should continue to strive for truth beyond all human conception, in a spirit of creative tolerance.

On the practical level, *satya* means *truth as action*, or *satyagraha*, which suggests the idea of 'seizing' or 'holding firmly to a good cause'; thus *satyagraha* is a categorical attitude or 'force' by which one holds firmly to, grasps and hangs in there until truth triumphs in the situation. And this truth-force, he argues, must meet the needs of society at large beyond the individual's selfish ends (Gandhi, 1968, 6, pp. 171ff).

There lurks in the idea of *satyagraha* all the connotations of a *force*, or exertion, of pushing oneself, or doggedly putting one's foot down, and so on. The force could be a subtly coercive one, or an overtly injurious or violent one. This is where Gandhi finds the Jaina precept of *ahimsa* or 'not causing injury or harm to another being' to be most instructive. Of course, we shouldn't overlook the Buddhist emphasis on just the same precept. Gandhi acknowledges as much and uses this negative precept of non-injury to qualify *satyagraha* so that no hurt or harm should arise.

But Gandhi does more: he transforms *ahimsa* into a dynamic condition for a stratagem that does not stop until the goal of the action is achieved! In other words, far from a passive 'do not' injunction, *ahimsa* (non-injury), when intertwined with *satyagraha* (truth-force), becomes a positive mode of action that raises the *intent* of this injunction to a much higher ethical level: it seeks to bring about what is *right* in the situation at hand. Further, the interest of the other party is not compromised, for activists would rather suffer injury or violence on themselves than have it inflicted on the other; and compassion or 'love', as Gandhi calls it, as well as utter humanity or humility, must accompany the action. This, Gandhi believes, can be universalized to form a principle of disinterested non-violent action.

This principle is then put to use in social and political action, in a civil disobedience movement, in non-violent freedom and civil rights struggles, some of which have achieved remarkable results. One can argue whether the application of this principle in some instances does or does not entail coercion, and whether this would nullify the principle; or whether the inadvertent violence unleashed in the process defeats the purpose altogether. The consensus of those who have been influenced by this principle, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., in leading the struggle for the rights of Afro-Americans in North America, is that the purpose is never defeated. This will perhaps go down as the most significant development of Indian ethics in the twentieth century.

#### iv Concluding remarks

What our enquiry shows is that the Indian culture, like any civilization, strives for ethically right conduct as well as a theoretical understanding of ethics. It may

not succeed in achieving the goal, or it may lose sight of its goal, or even fail to reach a stage of clarity in its ethical discourse. But there are some important ideas and a few principles that emerge; these helped the society to survive, and to develop, even aesthetically. For us in the modern era, edging towards the twenty-first century, they may seem inadequate: but they might at least provide some useful metaphors, or *analogues*, to engage with our own notions, ideas, theories and analysis.

*Dharma*, with its roots in *rita* or 'natural order', can open up a more holistic, organic and ecologically enlightened perspective as a contrast to the more individualistic, competitive, nature-subjugating, and technocratic environment in which we try and think ethics. *Karma* or 'action-effect', and even the Indian ideas of concentric life-cycles and human ends, may suggest other possibilities of integrating the disparate and finite features of human life into this organic whole. And last but not least, the principle of disinterested non-violent action may prove effective in the continuing struggles towards justice and peace in the world.

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# 5

## Buddhist ethics

PADMASIRI DE SILVA

### i Introduction

THE Buddha's personal name was Siddhartha and his family name was Gotama. His father was the ruler of the kingdom of the Sakyas in North India. As a prince living in north India during the sixth century BCE, Siddhartha was caught in the intellectual ferment of the times, of ascetics and seers and philosophers of various brands, materialists, sceptics, nihilists, determinists and theists. He was also highly disturbed by the rigidities of caste, by animal sacrifices and by the uncritical attitudes of rulers regarding these issues. But he was even more disturbed by the perennial human issues of sickness, anguish and suffering, and the riddle of life and death. Thus in the young Siddhartha who left the royal palace at the age of 29 to become an ascetic, we find the profile of a rebel as well as a philosopher.

In addition to inquiring into these issues, Siddhartha experimented with different lifestyles. He immersed himself in the different techniques of meditation current at the time. He learnt from the teachers of meditation at the time the practices leading to states of meditative absorption referred to as *jhānas*. But he wished to go beyond these current practices and developed a comprehensive system of meditation, including both the practice of tranquillity meditation to reach a stage of calmness and the development of insight. The development of insight was focused on the three important realities of impermanence, suffering and egolessness. By the practice of meditation, he attained enlightenment at the age of 35 years, and preached thereafter to his fellow men. For 45 years after his enlightenment he taught and spoke to all types of men and women, peasants, carpenters. Brahmins and outcastes, kings and criminals, as well as ascetics and philosophers. It is these discourses which have been preserved in the Pali canon and are the primary sources for our study of the ethics of Buddhism.

The teachings of the Buddha were handed down in the form of an oral tradition, and it was many years later (first century BCE) that the monks wrote the discourses in ola leaves. They remained so till during recent times they were edited and printed by the Pali Text Society. Of these discourses, the group of discourses called the *Vinaya Piṭaka* deal with the rules of discipline for the monks, while the *Sutta Piṭaka* contains the basic teachings of the Buddha. A systematization of the doctrine by later commentators is called the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka*. Together they are called the three baskets and provide the primary sources for the study of Buddhism as well as the guidelines for the practical codes of conduct.

The very early tradition of Buddhism often called *Theravāda* Buddhism took root in South East Asia, specially in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma and Cambodia. The later traditions, *Mahāyāna* (meaning the Greater Vehicle) developed in Nepal, China, Korea and Japan, while the tradition called the *Tantrayāna* (the Esoteric Vehicle) emerged in Tibet and Mongolia. The *Mahāyānist* referred to the early Buddhist tradition as *Hīnayāna* (the lesser vehicle). In this article we are concerned with the common ethical teachings of the Buddha. Some of the differences of emphasis brought out by the different traditions in relation to ethics will be dealt with in the final section of this analysis.

## ii Ethical concerns in the Buddhist tradition

When we refer to 'Buddhist ethics', we refer to the Buddha's analysis and insights into ethical issues, found dispersed over his discourses, as well as the reflections on ethical issues found in the later traditions. The discourses, however, provide the common doctrinal core for the analysis of ethical issues from a Buddhist perspective. Though he did not present a well-knit treatise on philosophical ethics, the discourses contain theoretical perspectives on major ethical issues. But beyond the rational scrutiny of ethical issues, he showed an abiding interest in ethics as a practical concern, a way of life and a well-defined ethical path towards liberation from suffering.

While the Buddha often emphasized the social dimensions of ethics, he also saw it as a personal quest marked by leading a good life, practising virtues and following meditational exercises. The practice of meditation emphasized the importance of paying attention to whatever one is doing while doing it, without the intrusion of distracting thoughts. Developing awareness of this sort laid the foundation for meditational exercises with specific objects for concentration. The development of meditation promoted its expansion into daily activities and enhanced individual morality. Thus in Buddhist ethics there is a close integration of the ethical as a rational engagement of analysis and argument, as a normative recommendation of conduct and a way of life, as a social expression and as an intense personal quest and mode of character development.

To understand how ethical concerns originate in the Buddhist traditions, one has to focus attention on the Four Noble Truths, which in a sense summarize the basic message of the Buddha. An understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the orientation of the Buddhist world-view helps us to place Buddhist ethics in a proper setting. At the core of the Buddha's doctrine is the notion of *dukkha*, a sense of *unsatisfactoriness* which lies at the heart of the perilous condition of human suffering, of physical pain and sickness, psychological conflict, anxiety and anguish and a deeper feature of the world described as insubstantiality. This latter feature of insubstantiality is related to the Buddhist doctrine of egolessness and the doctrine of change and impermanence. What we call an 'individual' or 'I' is, according to the Buddha, a combination of physical and psychological factors which are in constant change. By projecting a sense of 'permanence' onto a process which is in constant flux, man becomes disappointed when he faces

change, destruction and loss. This complex which we consider as an 'individual' is liable to constant suffering, and if we project and anticipate a continuous life of pleasure and joy in terms of our sense of an individual person, we find it difficult to accept that we are liable to sickness, grief and suffering. Thus in this manner the three doctrines of impermanence, suffering and egolessness are interrelated. The Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path as a component of the Four Noble Truths, are related to the diagnosis of the human predicament described by the Pali word *dukkha*. Reflections on morality and society cannot be severed from this basic concern.

Some see the notion of *dukkha* as indicating a pessimistic outlook. Yet the ideal that the Buddha offers for man in following the ethical system is an ideal of happiness. While *nibbāna* represents the ideal of ultimate happiness for man as a moral ideal, the Buddha also offers a qualified notion of happiness for the householder who lives a harmonious and righteous life. Just as there are various expressions of pain, there are also diverse grades of pleasure and well-being. While the righteous and harmonious life permits the householder to seek wealth by lawful means, without greed and longing, to get ease and pleasure for him or herself and do meritorious deeds, the recluse exercises a more stringent control over desires and wants and is more earnestly committed to the ideal of release from all suffering (*nibbāna*). Both the life ideals of the householder as well as those of the recluse are highly critical of the life of pure sensuality devoid of any ethical constraints. A life of pure pleasure by its inner nature ends up in boredom and dissonance, and interferes with the healthy functioning of family and community life. The Buddha condemned pure hedonism on psychological and ethical grounds. The Buddha was also critical of some materialists who did not believe in an afterlife and thus supported a hedonistic lifestyle without any moral values.

The Buddha was critical of the way of pure sensuality and the way of self-mortification, and considered his own way as the middle path. The first Noble Truth is the truth of suffering, the second deals with the arising of suffering, the third deals with the cessation of suffering (*nibbāna*), and the fourth with the way to end suffering (the Noble Eightfold Path). The Noble Eightfold Path has the following aspects: (1) right understanding; (2) right thought; (3) right speech; (4) right bodily action; (5) right livelihood; (6) right effort; (7) right mindfulness; (8) right concentration. An important point about the path is that the items fall under three divisions: items 3–5 come under ethical conduct (*sīla*), items 6–8 come under mental training (*samādhi*), and items 1 and 2 come under wisdom (*pañña*). Thus it is a threefold scheme of moral training, consisting of the practice of virtues and the avoidance of vices, the practice of meditation and the development of wisdom. It is through the Eightfold Path that one can attain the ultimate moral ideal of Buddhism.

### iii The moral philosophy of Buddhism

Philosophically, the first prerequisite for a system of ethics, according to the Buddha, is the notion of free will, secondly the distinction between good and

bad, and thirdly the notion of causation in relation to moral action. The third concept, as indicating the good and bad consequences of actions which can be morally assessed, is also related to a specifically Buddhist notion, survival after death.

Of these, the most crucial concept necessary for the evaluation of human action is the notion of *kamma*, based on the notion of moral causation. The Pali term *kamma* is used to refer to volitional acts which are expressed by *thought*, *speech* and *bodily action*. The oft-quoted statement 'I call the motive to be the deed' provides a focus for the evaluation of human action from a moral point of view. Volitional acts which come within the purview of moral evaluation can be good, bad or neutral, and could also be of a mixed nature.

When we evaluate an action, we can look at its genesis. If the action has as its roots greed, hatred and delusion, it is an unwholesome or bad action, and if it was generated by the opposite roots of liberality, compassionate love and wisdom, it is a good action. But we have also to see its consequences to others as well as oneself, as they also play a part in moral evaluation.

The Pali word '*cetanā*', usually translated as motive, is a complex term covering intention and motive as well as the consequences of action dependent on the motive or intention. According to the law of moral causation, if a person gives some money to a needy person several consequences follow in the form of psychological laws: it is a good thought and stabilizes the tendency to repeat such thoughts, it is a good action, and it is said that the greatest blessing of a good action is the tendency to repeat it, that it becomes a part of one's character. This psychological dimension is believed to extend over several births and to be carried over to another life.

There is another aspect to the consequences of good and bad actions. According to the law of moral causation, a person who gives for charity expects to get something in return, comforts in future life, and a person who steals or is miserly will be repaid by being subjected to poverty. These are two aspects of the moral consequences of action. We may describe the first aspect of character-building as the *craftsmanship model* of action and the second aspect, which focus on rewards and punishments, as the *judicial model* of action.

Another dimension of these two models is that disinterested character-building may be *nibbāna*-oriented, as it is basically an attempt to rid oneself of greed, hatred and delusion, and the attempt to accumulate merit is directed towards a better life in the future. It has been observed by scholars who have gone into the terminology that 'good' and 'bad', used in the context of *nibbāna*-oriented action, may be translated by the words *kusala* and *akusala*, and 'good' and 'bad', when speaking of the wish for a better existence in the future lives, may be translated by the terms *puñña* and *pāpa*. If *puñña* is rendered as merit and *pāpa* as de-merit, a meritorious action paradoxically helps us to collect more fuel for a longer journey in *samsāra* (the wheel of existence), while a good action in the form of *kusala* shortens our journey and speeds our approach to *nibbāna*.

The Buddha will not limit the evaluation of actions to the narrow concept of a motive alone, as the act has to be performed, and the manner in which it is

done and the consequences are important. In this sense this is a consequentialist or a teleological ethics. (See Article 19, CONSEQUENTIALISM.)

Within the consequentialist orientation, Buddhist ethics lays very great emphasis on working towards the material and spiritual welfare of others. The Buddha himself was described as a person concerned with the well-being and happiness of mankind. In general, Buddhist ethics has a utilitarian stance, but the Buddhist utilitarianism is not a hedonistic utilitarianism. (Varieties of utilitarianism are discussed in Article 20, UTILITY AND THE GOOD.) Certainly the Buddha would be critical of the pursuit of pure sensuality and also of any attempt to reduce human pleasures to a hedonistic calculus. As one proceeds on the path of meditation, the *jhānas* (states of deep meditative absorption) are associated with states of pleasure and happiness, not of a mundane nature but rather states of joy, zest and rapture. There are certain refinements in these states which go beyond the pleasures we normally associate with hedonism (the view that pleasure is or ought to be the goal of all our actions). Against the background of these *jhānic* states, concepts like hedonism and eudaimonism (in which 'happiness' plays the role that 'pleasure' does in the hedonistic doctrine) used in the context of Western ethics may lose clear application.

Buddhism may be described as a consequentialist ethic embodying the ideal of ultimate happiness for the individual, as well as a social ethic with a utilitarian stance concerned with the material and spiritual well-being of mankind. In keeping with this stance, Buddhism also has a strong altruistic component, specially embodied in the four sublime virtues of lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

The Buddha also emphasizes the role of duties and obligations in relevant contexts. The *Sigālōvāda Sutta* discusses the duties and rights of parents and children, husband and wife, teachers and pupils as well as one's obligations to friends and recluses. But what is described here are reciprocal relations of mutual obligations, rather than any concept of human rights. First, the Buddhist approach to duties and rights is more a humanistic than a legalistic one. Second, while considering duties and rights as important, the Buddha never elevated them into an ethic of duty and obligation as found in Western ethical systems. (See, for example, Article 18 AN ETHIC OF PRIMA FACIE DUTIES.) In ethical systems emerging in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a breach of duties is tied to the notion of feeling guilty about wrongdoing. Sin and guilt and worry over past offences are not concepts that fit into the Buddhist analysis of wrong-doing. In fact it is a difficult task to find a Pali equivalent in the discourses for notions like guilt in the context of wrongdoing. In general wrongdoing is described as unskilled action, as unwholesome, as a defilement etc. In fact, worry and restlessness, as well as unhealthy fears regarding wrongs done, are considered as obstructions to the leading of a morally good life. Thus while concepts of duty and obligations, as well as of justice and righteousness, play a part in Buddhist ethics, they are integrated within the broader humanistic and consequentialist ethics of Buddhism.

#### iv A Buddhist perspective on the place of knowledge and truth in ethics

In ordinary everyday situations, statements like 'There is a red book on my table' can be checked regarding their truth and falsity. But in ethics we get statements like 'Killing is wrong', 'Stealing is bad', 'He did wrong in not going to the appointment' and so on. Though these statements are grammatically similar to the other statement cited above, they appear to lack any cognitive content. Thus it is said that it is illogical to apply notions like knowledge and truth in the field of ethics. (For further discussion see Articles 35 and 38, REALISM and SUBJECTIVISM.)

Such problems did not disturb the Buddha and there is no explicit discussion in his discourses of the relationship between facts and values. Yet the Buddha upheld the relative objectivity of moral utterances as crucial to his system against the sceptics and the relativists of his time. There is a broad-based naturalistic stance in Buddhist ethics, and it can be said that *certain types of facts* are relevant as support for moral utterances. Thus in Buddhist ethics, there is no relationship of logical entailment between facts and values, but a relationship of specific kinds of relevance according to which facts will provide a *kind* of grounding for values.

But yet from another perspective it appears that a concept like *dukkha* seems to lie at the point of intersection between a range of facts and their evaluation. A word like *dukkha* is a description of a state of affairs, the nature of the human predicament, but in the context of the Four Noble Truths, it carries with it the notion that it has to be *known*, *abandoned* and *realized*. The first Noble Truth suggests that *dukkha* has to be realized, the second that it has to be abandoned, the third that it has to be realized and the fourth that knowledge about *dukkha* has to be developed and gradually refined so that it culminates in knowledge of *dukkha*. Thus in Buddhist ethics, in one sense facts are relevant for understanding values, but in another sense some of the central concepts like that of *dukkha* seem to lie at the point of intersection between values and facts.

It is also necessary to point out that the Buddha's use of the notion of 'fact' goes beyond its usage in Western ethical reflections. A 'fact' for the Buddha can be found out by the avenues of our normal senses, but he also upholds the acquaintance with facts through extra-sensory perception. Let us take an example like 'Killing is bad'. Killing is considered bad or wrong for several reasons. (1) The genesis of the action show that it is clearly associated with the effective root of hatred, sometimes with greed and also with the cognitive root of having wrong views; (2) It has harmful consequences to oneself and is an obstruction to attaining *nibbāna* or will have bad consequences in another life; (3) Here and now, it hardens one's character in transgressing the ideal of non-injury, makes one develop a heavy conscience, comes into conflict with other people and can be punished by the law.

Now, some of the information relevant to the normal utterances may be had by sensory observation, by self-analysis, by the observation of others, etc. But certain types of information like the consequences for a future life go beyond our normal powers. Buddhism also accepts that there are levels of spiritual develop-

ment and that the differences between normal perception and extra-sensory perception are merely a difference of degree, not of kind.

The Buddha's notion of facts and the relevance of facts to values is something which emerged from the nature of the world in which he lived. Sometimes we convert ordinary usages into excessively difficult riddles by trying to impose a formal rigour into them. The Buddha himself said that he was neither a traditionalist nor a rational metaphysician who considers that logic can solve all the problems, but an experimentalist who respects facts as they are found in the world. But facts to him also have some *significance* in the light of his doctrine. That significance is something which emerges from the natures of things and is not imposed from outside.

## v Buddhism as an ethics of virtues and vices

As an ethics concerned with the moral development of man, Buddhist ethics deal both with the nature of the evil states which darken the mind, as well as the wholesome mental states which illumine the mind. The sutta on the *Simili of the Cloth* cites sixteen such defilements: greed, covetousness, malevolence, anger, malice, hypocrisy, spite, envy, stinginess, deceit, treachery, obstinacy, impetuosity, arrogance, pride and conceit. The most well-known and important analysis is the tenfold evil actions, which are in turn related to the three roots of evil: killing, stealing, enjoying sensual pleasures of a wrong nature, false speech, slanderous speech and frivolous talk, as well as intense greed, malevolence and wrong view.

The Buddha requested people not only to refrain from such evil states, but also to practise positive moral virtues. Following the analysis of Wallace (*Virtues and Vices*, 1978), we can say that the virtues fall into three groups:

- 1 virtues of conscientiousness:  
veracity, truthfulness and righteousness
- 2 virtues of benevolence:  
lovingkindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity
- 3 virtues of self-restraint:  
self-control, abstinence, contentment, patience, celibacy, chastity, purity

The arrangement of the recommended moral qualities shows that Buddhist ethics brings into play a wide variety of virtues for the building up of human character. Some of them are closely welded to the natural feelings humans have for fellow beings, others apply to the needs of social organization and community living, and yet others are demanded by the path of moral development and self-restraint. Virtues and vices also refer to our emotional aspect. In addition to making a close analysis of the negative emotions like anger, malevolence, lust, envy and worry, the Buddha gave a central place to the positive and creative emotional responses which had a great moral relevance, like compassion, generosity and gratitude. His analysis shows that there is a great range and variety of emotional responses sharpening and expanding our moral sensibility. The link between moral psychology and ethics is a central feature of the ethics of Buddhism

and makes it appropriate to consider it as an ethic of virtue. (See Article 21, VIRTUE THEORY.)

## vi Buddhist social ethics

The social ethics of Buddhism revolve around two important ethical perspectives, which may be referred to as 'the ethic of care' and the 'ethic of rights'. It is a blend of the principles of humanistic altruism and the notion of a *righteous* social, moral and political order which provide the ethical foundations of society. Though the ethical path as a path towards liberation is basically a consequentialist ideal, the social and political ethics of Buddhism has a deontological strand as an ethics of duty and rights, which is, however, integrated into Buddhist social ethics in its own way.

The family forms a central unit in Buddhist social ethics. Within the family there are reciprocal duties that link up all members of the family. This notion of reciprocity in human relations means that talk of sexual equality and the rights of men and women is somewhat misplaced. The concept of equality was raised when the question of admission of women to the order became a practical issue. Regarding the moral and spiritual excellence of women, there is a well documented tradition of references in the discourses and the Buddha gave permission to initiate a separate order of nuns. Within the family it was accepted that a woman brings stability, care, patience and compassion. While women attained the state of sainthood (*arahat*), the concept of a Buddha was limited to men and this became a point of debate within the later traditions.

In rejecting caste and race the Buddha said that distinctions based on birth are artificial and the only worthwhile distinctions are based on character. In admitting people to the order he did not pay any attention to distinctions based on caste and socio-economic status.

The Buddha also showed concern regarding all forms of life. The Buddhist concept of society would in a deeper ethical sense include all living beings, not only those who are human but animals and lower creatures as well. Unlike most Western systems of ethics, the cultivation of socio-moral virtues covers behaviour in relation to all living beings.

The Buddha expected the universal monarch to govern justly and impartially. There are three components of the concept of righteousness; impartiality, just requital and truthfulness. While impartiality and fair play are emphasized for kings, their rule is expected to be pervaded by the spirit of benevolence. Above the social and political order was the Buddhist concept of *dharma*, the cosmic order in the universe, and the king had not merely to respect this order but also as the 'wheel-turning monarch' to see that this order was reflected in his regime. In general it may be said that though in the political order the concepts of rights and fairness are important, the Buddhist social ethics is centred on human relations, where the ethic of responsibility and the recognition of differences in need play an important part.

**vii Buddhist perspectives on practical ethics**

If one is to search for the existence of any core moral values in Buddhism, they are to be found in the five precepts: abstention from killing and hurting living creatures, abstention from stealing, abstention from wrong indulgence in sensual pleasures, abstention from lying and abstention from taking intoxicants. These precepts embody basic requirements for the living of a good life and the establishment of a good community. The respect for life and property, the acceptance of a lifestyle which rejects excessive, illegitimate and harmful pleasures, truthfulness and an awareness of the danger of certain social evils like alcoholism and drug addiction are the basic moral concerns of a Buddhist society.

During the time of the Buddha as well as during later debates, questions relating to these precepts have been discussed. We shall briefly take two of these issues, questions concerning the respect for life in relation to animals and the accumulation of wealth.

Even kings were expected to provide protected territory not only for human beings but also for beasts of the forests and birds of the air. Deliberate infliction of torture and hurt to animals and killing were condemned by the Buddha.

There are four topics in the discourses which are relevant to issues pertaining to the values of life: animal sacrifices, warfare, agriculture and meat-eating. The Buddha did not hesitate to condemn both the performance of animal sacrifices and the pleasures of hunting. He also pointed out the futility of warfare. He prohibited the monks from joining the army and also from digging the ground, as in this process there was the danger of injuring insect life. But regarding meat-eating he left it as an open possibility that if one practises compassion one would be inclined to practise vegetarianism. Also there is a social context where the Buddha himself and other monks went for their food with the begging bowl and walked silently through the streets and the marketplace. The Buddha had asked the monks not to ask for any particular food unless the monk was sick but collect what was offered. As far as the rules are concerned the monk may accept meat that is offered for a meal if the monk is convinced that it was not specially killed and prepared for a monk's meal. Though the Buddha rejects professions like the selling of armaments and the killing and selling of animals, he did not restrict the monk's food, unless it was forbidden because it was poisonous. It is also important that the Buddha did not want to make eating into a fad or a fetish through which recluses would seek purification. It appears that vegetarianism is a positive practice that can emerge through the practice of compassion, but in the context of the monks collecting the food that was given to them, there was no rule forbidding them from taking meat under all conditions.

The problem about the accumulation of wealth is of course well understood in terms of the lifestyles recommended by the Buddha. While the monk lives with no possessions except the robes and the begging bowl, the layman is encouraged to contribute to his economic stability. The layman is asked to concentrate on the production of wealth through skilled and earnest endeavour, and protecting wealth through savings and living within one's means. The Buddha condemned

both miserliness and extravagance and provided the guidelines for contented living. The layman has a right to property and to accumulate wealth to ensure a decent existence for his family, but not to develop greed and avarice for wealth. Also, the idea that the needy should be helped and that wealth should be given to the have-nots was accepted even by the kings who ruled according to the advice of the Buddha. Whatever moral values we take in terms of the five precepts, there was a pragmatism and realism in the Buddha's outlook, which provide useful resources for dealing with conflicts between human needs and moral ideals.

### viii Contributions to ethics in the later Buddhist traditions

The later Buddhist traditions of *Mahāyāna*, the *Tantrayāna* and Zen Buddhism are all rooted in the original teachings of the Buddha, and with the *Hīnayāna* tradition share his basic doctrines of egolessness, impermanence and suffering. But their techniques of communication and points of emphasis took different directions.

In relation to the ethics of Buddhism a central point on which both the *Mahāyāna* and the *Tantrayāna* traditions opened up a fresh line of inquiry was on the question whether everyone should aspire to be a Buddha or whether one should be contented with the cessation from suffering by attaining the state of perfection called the *arahant*. The *Mahāyānist* felt that instead of attaining enlightenment as a disciple of the Buddha, everyone should aspire to be a Buddha, so that one could help others. The *Mahāyānist* felt, like the followers of *Tantrayāna*, that there was a higher ideal, that of the *Bodhisatva*, which indicated an infinite commitment to others and was an expression of the widest limits of altruism. The Buddha is an enlightened one and a *Bodhisatva* is one who aspires to be a Buddha. The different lives of the *Bodhisatva* are dedicated to the practice of special virtues like charity, patience, effort, meditation and wisdom. The *Bodhisatva* attempts to identify himself with the liberation of others.

The *Tantrayāna* added a strong devotional strand into the religious practices with an emphasis on symbolism and rituals. As these were associated with esoteric teachings they do not appear to have any specific contribution to ethics which differs from the Mahayanist perspective.

The word Zen is an equivalent of the Sanskrit word *dhyāna* meaning meditation. It emerged from the Chinese soil and was deeply centred on the practice of meditation. But it was critical of moral codes and rituals which were practised through the force of convention. When a tradition gets too much stuck in rules, codes and procedures an intended 'means' can become an 'end' in itself. Also, the prolific philosophical and scholastic distinctions which emerged in the Indian tradition after the Buddha seemed to submerge the deep meditative tradition which the Buddha initiated. Thus the Zen masters used stories, paradoxes, parables, and meditational exercises called *koans* to shock the conventional mind stuck in rules and procedures. This is a useful perspective for the practice of morality rather than a theory of ethics, but it does emphasize that the practice of morality is intrinsically related to the inner transformation of the individual. Thus the Zen masters come out with the paradox that Zen begins where morality ends.

Both the early and later traditions of Buddhism continue as living traditions in different parts of the Eastern world and their impact has spread to the West. While the ethics of Buddhism influence the daily lives of its adherents, there is a great admixture of rituals and conventional practices of each culture, which can both be an aid to the development of the teachings of the Buddha as well as an obstruction. Thus Buddhism continues to live in the minds of people at different levels, of routine practice and rituals, intellectual reflection and debate, and a deeper personal quest rooted in Buddhist meditation.

## References

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