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Values And Ethics In Buddhism; Its Applications And Relevance

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Abstract

Buddhism is a unique religious system that serves as a path to enlightenment and liberation after life. It is based on the Buddha's 'Four Noble Truths' and 'Eight - Fold Path', which form the foundation of Buddhist ethics. The primary ethical activity in Buddhism is giving or generosity (dāna), which forms the basis for moral and spiritual development. Buddhism offers a philosophical middle way, rejecting extreme materialist worldviews and traditional religion's metaphysical dogmas. This research article entitled "Values and Ethics in Buddhism; its applications and Relevance" explores into the Values and Ethics embodied in the Buddhist traditions and examine its applications and relevance to the contemporary society. The study reveals the enduring principles of 'dana', 'sila' and 'bhavna', and ethical conduct central to Buddhist traditions in the advancement of moral, social, civic, and spiritual standard of an individual. The method of study is descriptive analytical and qualitative approach on the secondary literatures, texts, journal articles, educational practices explored through various sources. The objectives of present study are to understand the core values and ethics of Buddhism and its reliability and applicability to the modern society. The study concludes that Buddhist values and ethics are timeless and that if maintained by everyone, the world will become more sustainable for all human beings.

Keywords: Buddhist, Ethics, Values, applications, modern society.

Introduction

The foundation of Buddhist ethics and principles originates from the Buddha's teachings on the 'Four Noble Truths' (Ārya-Satyās) and the 'Noble Eight-fold Path' (Aṣṭāṅga-Mārga). Buddhist philosophy emphasizes resolving issues by transcending hidden desires. (Harvey, n.d. 2000) Buddha opposed superstition and irrationality, stressing the importance of truth, morality, and aesthetics. He established a religion free from dogma, priesthood, rituals, and sacraments, advocating for inner transformation and self-improvement.

Attaining enlightenment is contingent upon perfecting one's character and committing to goodness rather than blindly accepting dubious beliefs or indulging in ignorance.

Buddhism is a human-centered faith, promoting love and ethical principles. It advocates for the improvement of the underprivileged and marginalized. Throughout various Asian societies, Buddhism has demonstrated traits of socialism, humanitarianism, patience, compromise, and peaceful coexistence. It embodies a modern perspective and reflects the dissatisfaction of oppressed individuals and their desire for social fairness and a better existence. According to Dale Riepe, "Buddhism is humanistic as it believes in an individual's capacity to achieve moral aims without divine intervention." (Riepe.D, 1964) The Buddha's teachings are encapsulated in the 'Dhammapada' verse, stressing the avoidance of wrongdoing, the cultivation of goodness, and the purification of the mind. Negative qualities can be transformed into positive attributes, such as replacing anger with love or overcoming evil with goodness.

Buddhism is a philosophical system that emphasizes the teachings of the Buddha, the 'dharma', and the 'sangha'. These treasures provide Buddhists with valuable ethical guidance, particularly in written materials. The Buddhist scriptural canon consists of three major divisions: the 'Sutras', 'Vinaya', and 'Abhidharma' literature. (Tachibana, n.d.) These texts contain moral teachings and ethical reflections, as well as commentaries and treatises. The Buddha emphasizes personal reflection, as demonstrated in the story of the 'Kalamas' in "Kalama Sutta". The Buddha advises the followers not to blindly accept teachings from tradition or other sources without confirming them through personal experience. He teaches that actions motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion are unethical, while those motivated by the opposite are ethical. Non-greed, non-hate, and non-delusion are considered the roots of wholesome action, and are considered the central values of Buddhism. These values are equivalent to generosity, non-attachment, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, which are essential for understanding the nature of life and avoiding delusion or disorientation. (Meshram, 2013)

The present study is the descriptive methods of theoretical analysis of various secondary sources relating to the areas of study. In finding the literatures, I have explored the various published journals and books from the internet sites like Google, Scholar, Sci-hub, etc. In this research work, I have addressed the ethics and values embodied in Buddhism which is applicable and relevant to the present age. The objective of the present study is to investigate and explore into the core values and ethics in Buddhism and secondly, to emphasize its relevance and applications to the contemporary society.

Buddhist Ethics

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality, focusing on understanding the foundation and structure of morality and how one ought to live. It is not a scientific study, but it can guide individuals and groups in collective manners. Ethics is not a code of prohibitions, but rather a systematic understanding of moral concepts and justifications for right behavior. The study of ethics does not have the scope for proof and demonstration like in science and mathematics, but it can be over and above science, as it passes value judgments on scientific discoveries and inventions. In the pre-modern period, ethics was primarily used by theologians, but it has rapidly changed in modern times. The scope and definition of ethics is expanding with today's society and its meaning and significance is increasing. The problems related to ethics are not fixed and therefore ethical issues can be approached from different perspectives, as no society is static. (Goodman.n.d)

Buddha's philosophy emphasizes flexible creeds and rational rites and ceremonies, guiding followers towards the highest good or liberation through pure living and thinking. The ethical teachings demand no blind reliance from followers, and they offer an analytical study of ethical concepts and theories as well as positive recommendations for leading a way of life (K.n.d). This way of life is considered both possible and desirable, as it helps us attain the highest good in our personal or cosmic dimension and contributes to the well-being and happiness of mankind as a whole.

Buddhist ethics is closely connected with social philosophy, as it provides an account of society's nature, origin, and causes of social change, government functions, and the ideal social order. Man-made laws and social customs are not the basis of Buddhist ethics, as they are merely a matter of social custom and do not involve ethical considerations. Morality in Buddhism is essentially practical, as it is only a means leading to ultimate happiness. On the path to emancipation, each individual is responsible for their own fortunes and misfortunes, and liberation is the result of one's moral development. The Buddha's mission was to enlighten man on the nature of existence and advise them on how best to act for their happiness and the benefit of others. Buddhist ethics are not founded on commandments that men are compelled to follow. It is universally recognized as the most ethical religio-philosophical system of the world, with Professor Radhakrishnan calling it 'Ethical Idealism' (Radhakrishnan. S, 1989).

Buddhist Values and Moral Discipline

Buddhist canonical texts do not directly translate Ethics into English, but the closest term is 'sīla' (moral discipline), which is one of the three-fold disciplines that constitute the path leading to the end of suffering. 'Sīla' refers to overall principles of ethical behavior, including practices of right action, speech, and livelihood. There are several levels of 'sīla', which correspond to 'basic morality' (five precepts), 'basic morality with asceticism' (eight precepts), 'novice monkhood' (ten precepts), and 'monkhood' (vinaya or patimokkha) (Keown.n.d). The foundation for leading a moral life in the Buddhist tradition is two-fold: the restraints on

behavior called for in the five permanent precepts and the encouragement to selfless giving called for in the primary moral virtue of giving (dāna). In the Buddhist way of life, the Buddha saw that human beings get overwhelmed by greed, anger, and delusion, causing harm to themselves and each other. He recognized that most humans possess the ability to act unselfishly, with kindness and compassion, and that it is within human capacity to develop special knowledge through higher mental training.

In the Pali language, the Buddha devised three systematic trainings, known as ‘puññas’ (meritorious deeds) that support full humanity, give everyone a clear human mind, and develop special human knowledge or insight wisdom. Practicing ‘puñña’ is the foundation of an elevated, purified human life, consisting of three types: ‘dāna’ (generosity), ‘śīla’ (morality), and ‘bhāvnā’ (meditation), which can be further split into concentration and insight. ‘Dāna’ means charity, generosity, and the act of giving. Buddhism begins with ‘dāna’ as the first virtuous act to put oneself on the correct path, as giving is an act of sacrifice (Sahni.P,2008). By following this way of life step by step, individuals can overcome human weaknesses and characteristics that cause tension and boredom.

‘Dāna’, ‘Śīla’, and ‘Bhāvnā’

(1) Buddhists develop their primary ethical activity, giving or generosity (dāna), which forms the basis for moral and spiritual development. Giving done selflessly reduces the false concept of self and moves the giver closer to wisdom. The monastic ‘sangha’ or community relies on the laity for material support, encouraging humility and preventing isolation. The laity provides the ‘sangha’ with items like food, robes, medicine, and monasteries, while the monks and nuns return a greater gift, as the gift of ‘dhamma’ excels all gifts. Generosity is practiced not only towards the ‘sangha’ but also towards family, friends, work people, guests, the poor, homeless, and animals. In many countries, Buddhists demonstrate a concern for doing fruitful actions by deeds of giving, such as contributing to ceremonies. The value of action is generated not only by an individual's giving but also by rejoicing at the gifts of others. The concept of ‘dāna’ fosters moral development and spiritual progress in an individual due to its aspect of renunciation and non-attachment. It is the first of the ten ‘Bodhisattva’ perfections in both the ‘Mahayana’ and ‘Theravada’ traditions (De & Padmasiri, 1998).

(2) Śīla refers to adherence to certain ethical or moral conduct rules, which Buddha understood that rules could vary among individuals. There are rules for lay people, those who want to enter a committed religious life, and ‘monks’ or ‘nuns’ who adhere to a strict path of discipline and purification. The śīla is a graduated thing, with each person picking up what they can follow for the present. Each precept is a promise of their own free-will. By developing dāna, a Buddhist develops their ethical virtue, or śīla, by observing self-discipline in keeping certain precepts. This practice is seen as a form of giving, preventing fear and ill-will. It is believed that sub-human rebirths can be avoided through the practice of dāna and śīla, emphasizing moral restraint and self-

control as means of protecting others and purifying one's character. Śīla emphasizes the five virtues or precepts in an individual life (Stanley, 2015). They are:

(a) Non injury

The first precept in Hindu and Jain philosophy is the concept of 'ahiṃsā', or non-injury, which prohibits the intentional killing of any living being, including humans. It states that one should not kill a living creature, cause to kill, or approve of others killing. This precept is not limited to humans, as all conscious beings share the same cycle of rebirths and experiences various types of suffering. Killing or injuring a human is worse than harming an animal or a larger or more developed one. The precept can be broken even if a being is killed by someone else, unless the person who makes order and agent mistakenly kill a different being. The first precept has implications for various aspects of life, including nature, war, suicide, euthanasia, and abortion.

(b) Avoid theft

The second precept in the 'Upāsaka-Śīla Sūtra' prohibits theft, particularly for monks, who are defeated if they steal an amount that makes them liable to prosecution. The theft is considered worse based on the value of the stolen item and the virtue of the person stolen from. The precept also covers fraud, cheating, forgery, and falsely denying debt. Breaking the precept involves claiming excessive compensation for theft, accepting gifts of multiple robes, and giving unfulfilled promises to one monk. This rule is based on the 'Upāsaka-Śīla' Sūtra's teachings of Buddhism.

(c) Avoid Sexual misbehavior

The monastic ideal of Buddhism emphasizes celibacy, but not everyone is willing to follow this ideal. The third precept focuses on avoiding suffering through sexual behavior, with adultery being the most straightforward breach. Adultery is seen as an expression of greed and harm to others. The definition of adultery varies according to different marriage patterns, and Buddhism has been flexible in adapting to these. Adultery with a woman without her husband's knowledge or compliance still breaks the precept due to its malicious nature. The precept is extended to intercourse with any woman in a relationship with another man. The third precept also includes intercourse with engaged or protected women or young girls. Breaching the precept includes rape and incest, and the severity depends on the virtue of the woman in which she maintains the precept.

(d) Avoid wrong speech

The eight-fold path in Buddhism consists of three precepts: 'right action', and 'right speech'. The fourth precept, 'right speech', focuses on avoiding false speech and other forms of 'wrong speech' that cause mental turmoil or suffering. It is considered the second most important precept after the first, as a person who has no shame at intentional lying can cause evil actions. The gravest way to break any precept is lying to cause a schism in the 'sangha'. Truth can be as severed through asseveration of moral or spiritual truth or admitting a failing, which

can save the utterer or someone else from danger. However, truth can be harmful if spoken at the wrong time, so it should be withheld if it would lead to wholesome states of mind declining and objectionable ones increasing in those one speaks to. Well-spoken, un-blameworthy speech should be spoken at the right time, in accordance with truth, gently, purposefully, and with a friendly heart. The Buddha only spoke what was true and spiritually beneficial, whether or not it was disagreeable to others.

(e) Sobriety

The fifth precept in Buddhism is about 'right mindfulness', which is not listed under 'right action' or 'right speech' but can be seen as an aid to 'right mindfulness'. Intoxication leads to a masking of life's sufferings, lack of mental clarity, and increased risk of breaking other precepts. Breaking this precept can result in six dangers: current waste of money increased quarrelling, liability to sickness, loss of good name, indecent exposure, and weakening of wisdom. Drinking intoxicating liquors negatively affects memory and hinders the good path, decreasing all virtues. In a monastic rule, even a small amount of alcohol is considered an offense, but some people still follow the fifth precept, avoiding intoxicating substances except for genuine medicinal purposes. Some view intoxication as a breach of the precept, while others still consume alcohol.

(3) Bhāvnā, or meditation, is the training of the mind, etymologically meaning development. The Buddha believed everything emanates from the mind, and as wars begin in the minds of men, defenses of peace must be constructed. A pure, trained mind that can be controlled at will, discovers itself, and discovers the secret of life, problems, and reality is man's greatest treasure.

‘Dāna’ is essential for concentrating the mind and developing higher knowledge. It weakens greed, anger, and delusion tendencies. Mental development, or ‘bhāvnā’, is a meritorious practice for a clean and clear mind. Concentration leads to wisdom and special human knowledge. ‘śīla’ is the most important of the three ‘puññas’, as it protects one's individual and larger world (Kalupahana.n.d).

Applications and Relevance of Buddhist Ethics and Values

The rational standard and materialist outlook of modern science have significantly influenced the intellectual life of modern man, leading to significant material progress. However, this has not resulted in a more contented life for humans, as they face numerous moral issues such as terrorism, human rights violations, discrimination, and violence against innocent individuals, poverty, and hardship. In Buddhist terms, scientific and technological progress has not reduced the unpleasant roots of human behavior, such as greed, hatred, and delusion (Jayatilleke, n.d). This is crucial for peace, harmony, happiness, and contentment in society. Buddhism offers a philosophical middle way that recognizes the norms of scientific rationality while rejecting the extreme materialist worldview of modern science and the metaphysical and dogmatic fundamentalism of traditional religion.

Modern science does not provide us with knowledge of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. When humans are not concerned with morally good life principles, social interaction may not be very different from that among brutes. Human beings desire to live well and seek rationally justifiable moral ideals and goals, which distinguishes life from that among brutes. Buddhism can be considered a path of moral perfection, consisting of gradual stages of ethical purification (Keown, n.d). The goal of Buddhism is to modify a person's behavior and transform their emotive and cognitive constitution, leading to an overthrow of existence and suffering. The goal of Buddhism is defined purely in psychological terms, rather than merging with God or Brahman or surviving to eternity in an incomprehensible realm of Being, but becoming free from greed, hatred, and delusion.

Buddhism advocates for moral perfection as the ultimate goal, aiming to eradicate the distasteful psychological roots of human behavior. It recognizes that a valid basis for making moral judgments must be discovered through human experience, rather than metaphysical reality. The conditions under which humans become happy and content are generally the same, and facts about these conditions are directly relevant to our moral life. To live morally, one must pay due regard to the moral point of view, which involves avoiding misery to oneself and others while easing the suffering of others. The significance of Buddhism to modern society lies in its approach to morality, which does not seek to determine what is right or wrong by tying moral life to metaphysical dogmas or sectarian Gods. Modern science, which seeks to displace metaphysics and religious dogma, attempts to transform society by changing material conditions of living. The scientific world-view attaches no significance to the importance of morality, viewing morality as a matter of attitudes and emotions. Moral values are considered relative and subjective, with only empirical facts having objectivity (Sen, 2014).

The problems of modern society can be explained from the Buddhist standpoint as a consequence of the separation of scientific knowledge and technological skill from moral wisdom. The proliferation of greed and hatred at all levels of social interaction has created economic disparity, poverty, and destitution. The lack of concern for the well-being of others leads to increased social conflict and tension. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist way of life is the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion. If much of the psychological insanity that produces moral crisis in modern society is the consequence of the proliferation of greed, hatred, and delusion, then the Buddhist ideal of moral perfection can be directly relevant to the social life of modern man.

Conclusion

Buddha, a revered figure in Buddhism, believed in becoming and rejecting both being and non-being. He adopted the metaphysical mean, rejecting self-indulgence and self-mortification, and enjoining the ethics of moderation. He outlined the four noble truths and the noble eight-fold path, emphasizing purity of the inner life, purging the mind of all impurities, and fostering universal good-will and love. Buddhist ethics are altruistic,

focusing on non-injury, compassion for the distressed, joy for the virtuous, and indifference to the vicious. This middle path avoids both extremes and promotes purity of heart, conduct, equanimity, peace, and enlightenment. Buddhism also preaches compassion toward all living creatures and charity for the poor, but more fundamentally, it prescribes mindfulness and simplicity.

In today's modern age, humans have become alienated from themselves and nature due to the advent of science and technology. This has led to a loss of faith in theistic religions and a lack of respect for moral and spiritual values. The industrial revolution and the acquisition of wealth through mechanical exploitation of natural resources have led to a materialistic attitude towards nature, which has adverse effects on both human well-being and nature. Modern life is characterized by the world getting smaller, greater access to each other, and the disappearance of communication barriers. This has led to problems such as gender discrimination, economic and political rivalry, pollution, population explosion, scarcity of resources, and indiscriminate use of resources. The strength of Buddhist ethics lies in its ability to retain fundamental values while being creatively and legitimately applied to the new circumstances of modern life.

Applying Buddhist ethics to new circumstances of daily living is crucial for the Buddhist community and society as a whole. Unpleasant actions such as greed, anger, hatred, and delusion are the main reasons for unenlightened living that is fundamentally unsatisfactory. The precepts, traditionally taught in Buddhism, are the living heart of Buddhism and can be applied in new ways to the complexities of modern life. The five moral precepts, which embody the fundamentals of Buddhist ethical teachings, can be applied in everyday worldly situations. By focusing on the context of modern society and re-examining the meaning and application of these precepts using the framework of karma, we can assess how the moral precepts can be practically applied. It is universally believed that everything continues in a flux, in a process of change and evolution. This has allowed Buddhism to adapt to different times and civilizations, making any aspect of Buddhist ethical teachings relevant and applicable to modern times.

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