

7 Buddhist Social Ethics

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§ 1. Background

Buddhist ethics can be better understood when we take into consideration other forms of ethics at and before the time of the Buddha. There are the following four kinds of ethics:

○ (1) There was Upanisadic Ethics which is a form of Mysticism, because it believed that you are basically Brahma and you are divine. So a question arises, if you are already Brahma or divine, why are men evil?

○ (2) Then there was the religion of Brahmanism. That is a form of Theism. Under Brahmanic Tradition, religion became sort of Formalism or Ritualism.

○ (3) At the contemporary time of the Buddha, you find Jainism which was Asceticism. Ethics in Jainism is based on severe asceticism.

○ (4) Then among the 6 heretic teachers, majority were Materialists. They rejected religion.

It is under this context, we should understand the significance of Buddhist Ethics.

○ First, Buddhism does not recognize a creator God such as Brahma, so the Upanisadic Ethics is rejected.

○ Second, Buddhism does not recognize the validity of sacrifice so Brahmanic tradition of ethics is also rejected.

○ Third, Buddhism does not encourage austerities since it weakens one’s intelligence rather than strengthens it. A sound mind is in a healthy body. So Jain ethics is also rejected.

○ Fourth, the materialist ethics is also rejected because they rejected religion and recognize no survival, no rebirth after death.

The most important thing about Buddhist Ethics is that Buddhism does not make distinction between religion and Ethics. In Buddhism, no contradiction is made between religion and ethics. In fact Buddhism was recognized as a moral system at the time of the Buddha.

This means that even for the sake of religion, you cannot transgress moral precepts. We cannot start holy war under the name of religion. If killing is bad, it is bad in any way, under any circumstances. Even for the sake of religion, you never justify it.

§ 2. The Threefold Foundation of Buddhist Ethics

2.1. the Advocacy and Justification of Moral Life

First, Buddhism is Kammavāda which means the Advocacy and Justification of Moral Life. This means that Buddhism acknowledges morally good and bad, right and wrong as the operations of the community and society. It is the understanding by general consensus that certain actions are considered "unworthy" or "worthy".
All religions are included under this category. However, Buddhism distinguishes itself from other religions as it does not advocate a Creator God who sits there in judgment of human actions and behaviors.

The Buddhist morality operates on the basis of Dependent Co-arising. In other words, an action does operate on several causes. For instance, when killing takes place, five factors are involved: (1) a living being, (2) the actual perceiving of a living being, (3) a thought of killing, (4) the attack, and (5) death as a result of it.

2.2. The Recognition of the Efficacy of Moral Acts

Second, Buddhism is *Kiriyavāda* which means the Recognition of the Efficacy of Moral Acts.

This means that Buddhism recognizes that every intentional act bears its fruits, whether good or bad, wholesome or unwholesome and that there are causal relations between the very act and the consequences.

Therefore, the doer is wholly responsible for the consequences of his own action no matter they are good or bad. The Buddha says:

“So, when a fool does wrong deeds, he does not realize (their evil nature); by his own deeds the stupid man is tormented, like one burnt by fire.” (Dhp.136)

“Deeds are one’s own... beings are heir to their deeds, deeds are matrix, deeds are kin, deeds are arbiters. Deeds divided beings, that is to say by lowness and excellence.” (M.III.203, trans. Woodward)

“Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of their own actions; they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have their actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior.” (Nyanamoli, the Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha, 1053)

The Buddha goes on to explain the karmic effects of various actions.

By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depended on oneself; no one can purify another.

(Dhammapada, verse no. 165)

Since the Buddhist morality operates on the basis of Dependent Co-arising, so there is no single effect from a single cause, there are multiple causes and multiple effects.

2.3. The Recognition of the Necessity and Desirability of Human Effort

Third, Buddhism is *Viriyavāda* means the Recognition of the Necessity and Desirability of Human Effort in the Practice of Moral Life.

It means that for actions to be considered as possessing moral values, human efforts are required. In other words, one needs to make an effort in leading a moral life. The Buddha says:

“You yourselves must strive; the Buddhas only point the way. Those meditative ones who tread the path are released from the bonds of Mara.” (Dhammapada, verse no. 176)
The Buddha lied down various precepts of training and practice for both monks and lay people to follow in order to attain moral perfection. These precepts are not commandments but to be followed and practiced voluntarily.

According to early Buddhist doctrines, moral values collapse if any one or all of those three foundations (bases) are absent. It is best to recall the three general views that tried to explain human existence in the time of the Buddha. The Buddha says:

“There are certain recluses and brahmins who teach thus, who hold this view: (1) Whatever weal or woe or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action. (2) There are some others teach: Whatever weal or woe or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to the creation of a Supreme Deity. (3) Others teach that all such are uncaused and unconditioned.” (A.I.173)

There is neither desire to do, nor effort to do, nor necessity to do this deed or abstain from that deed. So then, the necessity for action or inaction not being found to exist in truth and verity, the term recluse cannot reasonably be applied to yourselves, since you live in a state of bewilderment with faculties unwarded. (A.I.173)

(1) Everything is due to the creator God. This view can be termed as “theistic determinism”. Gautama Buddha argues that if such were the case then there would no longer be the necessity of leading a moral life. Because whatever good or bad, right or wrong befell man and the world in the past, present and future, were therefore the works of the creator.

Hence, man’s free will of choice and act is denied and man cannot be responsible for his actions. As a result the second and third foundations of morality collapse.

(2) Everything is due to past karma. This view can be termed as “karmic determinism”. Gautama Buddha argues that if such were the case, then leading a moral life was meaningless because the present action is also a result of past karma.

In the same way, this also denies man’s free will of choice and act. In contrast, Buddhism strongly advocates free will which is the vital factor for human perfection and liberation.

(3) Everything is due to chance. This view can be termed as “fortuitous origination”. Gautama Buddha argues that if such were the case, then there is no causal relation between the actions and their fruits.

If everything happens by chance, then man’s effort is useless and there is no meaning in leading a moral life. So man is not responsible for his own action because anything can happen.

The Buddha severely criticizes this kind of morality because it denies efficacy of moral life which is the foundation of both personal growth and a peaceful society. It is on this basis that early Buddhism is basically a system of morality.
§ 3. Buddhist ethics has to do with human conduct

Buddhist ethical conducts are concerned with the moral behaviors of man and within the society in which he lives. It involves his interactions and interpersonal relationships with those living with and around him, be they people or otherwise (animals, devas, the environment, the eco-system etc).

Not only does the behavior as expressed in his speech and actions important in determining his moral behaviors but the purifications of whatever mental proclivities (anussaya) deemed to create unwholesome/unskillful (akusala) acts in speech and action is looked upon as necessary in determining his moral conduct also.

Man’s behavior is concerned with what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. There are a large number of terms used in the Buddhist scripture to indicate what is good and what is bad:

- Kusala and akusala – wholesome and unwholesome, skilful and unskilful,
- Puñña and pāpa – what is good and what is evil
- Anavajja and sāvajja – what is morally correct, what is morally wrong
- Karaniya and akaraniya – what ought to be done and what ought not to be done,
- Ariya and anariya – what is noble, what is ignoble
- Settha and hina – what is foremost, excellent and what is low
- Sukka and kanha – white and black (good and evil)
- Dhamma and adhamma – righteous and non-righteous
- Sucarita and duccarita – well-behaved and ill-behaved
- Samacariya and visamacariya – even-behaviour and uneven-behaviour

All these terms are used in the Pāli literature to describe what is morally good and what is morally bad. But the first two pairs are important.

3.1. Difference between Kusala 善 and puñña 功德

There are two Pali words to describe a good action: kusala and puñña, however, there is a subtle distinction between them.

Puñña means ‘merit’ or ‘meritorious deeds’, it is a popular term for karmically wholesome action. Opposite term is pāpa, bad, evil.

According to Buddhism, both puñña and pāpa are due to ignorance because you do anything, puñña or pāpa, with self-interest. You practise good actions in order to become famous, well-known. You give away something in this life in order to get more in next life, just like to deposit money in the bank for interest. There is an element of egoism there.

The Buddha says that all volitional acts or karmical acts are due to ignorance (avijjā paccayā samkhārā). Here puñña and pāpa perpetuate in Samsāra 轮迴 process. Those who practise puñña will be born in heaven, and those who practise pāpa will be reborn in the suffering state.
Therefore, the Buddha said, “I do not want even iota of puñña.” Actually speaking, puñña and pāpa are not Buddhistic. It is there all the time throughout the Samsāra, no matter the Buddha was born or not. What is called puñña and what is called pāpa are there throughout.

Kusala, on the other hand, is morally good action which is not motivated by any form of self-interest. And as a result it does not produce karmic effects.

In Buddhism, the term kusala is used to describe a good action and akusala is used to describe a bad action. Here kusala as a technical term has two meanings: (1) the wholesome state of mind, healthy state of mind which is stable, pure, unencumbered, ready-to-act, calm and contented, (2) skillfulness in producing an uplifting mental state and spiritual progress in the doer.

Real Kusala is only performed by the saint, such as the Buddha and Arahants. Therefore, although they also perform good actions but they do not accumulate karma and as a result they go out of samsara.

So Nibbāna is not something transcend Kusala, but the highest good. All the acts performed by saints are Kusala, because they destroy the ego illusion.

§ 4. Criterion adopted in Buddhism

Some scholars say that Buddhist moral criterion is purely psychological. There is no compulsory for you to follow Buddhist moral ethics. Buddhist ethics is more autonomous, independent of any outside power like God or Mahabrahma. So the internal individual is the agent. He is the captain of his own destiny. He is responsible for what he does.

4.1. First Psychological Criterion

The basic criterion is that any act performed and motivated by greed (lobha), hatred (dosa), and delusion (moha) is bad (akusala), and any act performed and motivated by generosity (alobha), sympathetic joy (adosa) and wisdom (amoha) is good and skilful (kusala). (M.I.47)

i) Here greed (lobha) covers a wide range of mental states from mild longing up to full-blown lust, avarice, fame-seeking and dogmatic clinging to ideas.

So the opposite of greed (alobha) covers states of mind from small generous impulses through to a strong urge for renunciation of worldly pleasures.

ii) Hatred (dosa, Skt: dveṣa) covers mild irritation through to burning resentment and wrath.

So the opposite of hatred (adosa) covers friendliness through to forbearance in the face of great provocation, and deep loving kindness and compassion for all beings.

iii) Delusion (moha) is the veiling of truth from oneself, as in dull, foggy states of mind through to specious doubt on moral and spiritual matters, distorting the truth, and turning away from the truth.
The opposite of delusion (amoha) covers clarity of mind through to the deepest insight into reality.

This criterion is purely psychological. Whatever leads you to harmony, mental healthy is good, whatever leads you to disharmony and mental illness is bad. So Nibbāna is the highest state of mental health.

Therefore, the criterion is not dependent on any outside agent or God. You are responsible for what you have done. The Buddha says, “you yourself should work out for your own salvation, for the Buddhas are only teachers”, (Tumheh kiccam kātabbam, akkhātāro Tathāgatā). This is up to you to follow the path.

Greed and hatred are grounded in delusion, and greed may lead to hatred. It is said that greed and delusion are lesser faults, but fade slowly, while hatred is a great fault, but fades quickly. (A.I.200)

This gives a clear indication of Buddhist values, especially the need to develop wisdom--analytically directed intuitive insight--so as to overcome delusion.

4.2. Second Consequential Criterion

Whatever action that causes direct suffering consequence is unwholesome and direct happy consequence is wholesome. This is taught in the Ambalatthikārāhulovāda Sutta (Advice to Rāhula at Ambalaṭṭhikā).

The Buddha advises that one should reflect before, during and after any action of body, speech or thought, to consider whether it might conduce to the harm of oneself, others or both, such that it is unwholesome and results in dukkha. If one sees that it will so result, one should desist from the action. If one sees that the action conduces to the harm of neither oneself nor others, nor both, it can be seen to be wholesome, with a happy result (M.I.415-16).

This criterion is based on the idea that the experience of pain and pleasure is common to all living beings, because – all living beings run after pleasure and avoid of suffering (sabbe satta sukhakāmā dukkhapatikula).

Therefore, what is disagreeable to me is disagreeable to others also. If I do not like aversion, others certainly do not like aversion. If I do not like to be killed, so are others.

All tremble at the rod. All fear death.

Comparing others with oneself, one should neither strike nor cause to strike. (Dhp. 129)

All tremble at the rod. Life is dear to all.

Comparing others with oneself, one should neither strike nor cause to strike. (Dhp. 130)

How do we know it? It is through inference. You place yourself in others’ position, and then think of other. This is self comparison. All are scare of death, all are scare of killing. Therefore you should compare yourself to others, and abstain from depriving other’s life. Though the criterion is purely psychological, but the propositions are objective.
4.3. Third Nirvāṇa Criterion

Anything leads one to nirvāṇa is wholesome (kusala), anything leads one away from nirvāṇa is unwholesome (akusala), because since nirvāṇa represents the highest state of mental perfection, mental healthy, anything leads to that state is good.

The third type of criterion for what is wholesome or unwholesome builds on the second. It concerns an action’s contribution to spiritual development, culminating in Nirvana.

Thus, it is said that unwholesome conduct is that which causes injury that is, having dukkha as fruit, due to leading to the torment of oneself, others or both, and conducing to the arising of further unwholesome states and the diminution of wholesome ones: that is, having unhealthy effects on the psyche. Wholesome actions are of the opposite kind (M.II.114-15).

Moreover, “wrong directed thought”, for example, is said not only to conduce to the harm of self and others but to be “destructive of intuitive wisdom, associated with distress, not conducive to Nirvana”, while “right thought” has the opposite effect (M.I.115-16).

4.3.1. Wholesome and unwholesome

Here we need to explain a bit more about “unwholesome” in the above criterion. In the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (M.I.147), a list of “unwholesome” specifies as:

- 1) onslaught on living beings,
- 2) taking what is not given,
- 3) sensual misconduct,
- 4) lying speech,
- 5) back-biting speech,
- 6) harsh speech,
- 7) empty gossip,
- 8) covetousness (abhijjhā),
- 9) ill-will (byāpāda), and
- 10) wrong view (particularly the view that one should not be held responsible for one’s actions, that actions matter).

That is the wrong action of body (1-3), speech (4-7) and mind (8-10). What is wholesome is restraint (veramaṇī) from each of these.

Such unwholesome actions are said to be “of unwholesome will (akusala-sañcetanika), yielding dukkha, ripening in dukkha” (A.V.292).

Of these actions, only those relating to body and speech would normally be seen as coming under the purview of the English words “morality” or “ethics”; indeed the Pali word sīla, or “moral virtue”, has a similar range.
That which is "wholesome" or "unwholesome", then, goes beyond purely moral considerations to include states of mind, which may have no direct effect on other people. All the factors of the Eightfold Path, for example, are seen as "wholesome".

4.4. Fourth Criterion
In the Kālāma Sutta (A I.188), the Buddha advised the Kalamas to reflect on the following three ways when an act is to be committed: (This is also found in the Bāhitika Sutta, M II.114)

○ First, Conscience (attādhipateyya): evil acts result in self-blame. Your conscience is disturbed when an evil action is committed. That is one reason why you should refrain from committing evil acts. The internal monitor, watcher is with you. You control yourself.

○ Second, It refers to what the world thinks about (lokādhipateyya), because evil acts will be condemned by the wise, good acts will be appreciated by the wise. Here the standard is wise people (viñña), not ordinary people (Pali: Puthujjana, Skt: prtagjana). Today we say public opinion.

○ Third, You must think whether it is in consonance with righteousness (dhammādhipateyya). All what you do must be conformed to moral sense (dhamma, righteousness), because according to Hinduism and Buddhism, the distinction between man and animal is Dhamma, moral sense, consciousness, righteousness.

One who is devoid of moral sense is like a beast. Therefore, according to Buddhism, moral shame (hiri or hiri) and moral dread (ottappa, Skt: apatrapya) are guardians of the world, because all human beings have these two qualities. (A.1.51, D.III.284, S.II. 206, It. 36, Nett. 39, Vism. 464, J.I.129, DhsA. 124)

The Chinese translation of the Samyuktāgama also says: there are two pure white dharmas which can protect the world, what are they? They are moral shame (慚) and moral dread (愧). If there are no these two things in the world, there is no parents, no brothers and sisters, no wife, no relatives etc. all will be in a chaos. (T2, 340c, 本事經, T17, 680b)

Peter Harvey further explains the above two words as follows. The Pali word Hiri is ‘self-respect’ which causes one to seek to avoid any action which one feels worthy of oneself and lowers one’s moral integrity.

Ottappa is “regard for consequences”, being stimulated by concern over reproach and blame for an action (whether from oneself or others), embarrassment before others (especially those one respects), legal punishment or the karmic results of an action.

So, the first one is self-control by conscience, the second is controlled by the world, and the third is by righteousness. Therefore, there always be self-reflection, self-examination. You must reflect before you do (paccavekkhitvā). You must examine the act you propose to do whether it leads to:

- your own harm – Atta-bhayabadha
- the harm of others – Para-bhayabadha
- the harm of both – Ubhaya-bhayabadha
Any act which leads to your own harm, the harm of others or the harm of both is unwholesome (akusala). Therefore, you must refrain from committing such an act. But any act that leads to: your own good (attahitta) the good of others (parahita) the good of both (ubhayahita) is wholesome (kusala).

§ 5. The degree of unwholesomeness in actions

First killing is discussed by the great commentator Buddhaghosa as follows:

That action is of lesser fault in regard to those without good qualities (guna) such as animals while it is of greater fault when they are of good qualities and virtues such as human. In other words, it is a grave sin when killing involves human beings.

In regard to those with good qualities – humans etc., the action is of lesser fault when they are of few good qualities, while it is greater fault when they are of many good qualities. For instance, killing an evil person is considered to acquire less fault.

In regard to those without good qualities – animals etc., the action is of lesser fault when they are small, greater fault when they have a large physical frame. It is because the greater effort involved when the frame is large and even where the effort is the same, due to the greater substance of animal.

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<th>Greater fault</th>
<th>Lesser fault</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human</td>
<td>Many good qualities</td>
<td>Few good qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal</td>
<td>Large physical frame</td>
<td>Small physical frame</td>
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In regard to the degree of both intention and knowledge involved in the affect the degree of unwholesomeness of an action, one can outline five levels of unwholesomeness accordingly (Harvey: Criteria):

1) An action performed without intending to do that particular action, for example accidentally treading on an insect, without any thought of harming, or doing something when one is insane.

Such an action is not seen as unwholesome, blameworthy or as generating any bad karmic results. This can be seen from the fact that it is said that to accidentally crush worms while crushing sugar cane for its juice is not blameable (Milindapanha.166) though to deliberately kill any living being is morally blameable.

Again, a monk who breaks a monastic rule when mad does not commit an offence (Vin.IV.125).

This is because according to Buddhism, it is only intentional actions that produce karmical effects, not otherwise.
For instance, a blind Arahant, who walked in the whole morning, killed many ants without knowing. When this reported to the Buddha, he said that the arahant did not do bad karma.

2) If one knows that a certain kind of action is evil, but does it when one is not in full control of oneself, for example when drunk or impassioned. This is a lesser evil than if one did it with full knowledge of what one was doing, and with full intention.

For instance, Angulimāla, who was a bandit formerly and killed many people, became a disciple of the Buddha who told him to say the following when the former saw a woman who had difficulty in giving birth.

"Sister, since I was born, I do not recall that I have ever intentionally deprived a living being of life. By this truth, may you be well and may your infant be well!" (M II.103)

In this case, although Angulimāla intentionally killed many people but that was done when he was influenced by his teacher.

The action was not in accordance with his nature for he was unhinged, impassioned. It was when he was out of his mind, thoroughly confused and agitated with thoughts confused, in a turmoil and disturbed, like a madman.

Thus it is said that “Evil done by one who is unhinged...is not of great blame here and now, nor is it so in respect of its ripening in a future state”. Thus, full insanity excuses an act, while a temporary “unhinged” state, from passion or drink, means that there is little moral blame or karmic effect; getting into such a state can be held to be blameworthy, though.

The result of Angulimāla’s past bad actions is that he suffered attacks from children when he went out for begging.

3) If one does an evil action when one is unclear or mistaken about the object affected by the action. This is moderately blameable.

Thus, while it is an offence requiring expiation for a monk to intentionally kill a living being, it is a lesser offence, of “wrong-doing”, if a) he is in doubt as to whether it is a living being, or b) if he tries to kill a non-living thing that he thinks is, or might be, living, for example by shooting an arrow at it. There is no offence, though, if he fires an arrow at a living being not knowing that it is a living being (Vin.IV.125).

4) An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing, and knows that the action is evil. This is the most obvious kind of wrong action, with bad karmic results, particularly if it is premeditated. This is explicit.
5) An evil action done where one intends to do the act, fully knows what one is doing (as in 4), but does not recognize that one is doing wrong. This is seen as the worse kind of action. Terrorism, for instance.

The *Milindapanha* 84, says that if an evil action is done “unknowingly (ajānanto)”, it has a worse karmic effect than if it is done “knowingly”. This is illustrated by saying that a person taking hold of a red-hot iron ball is more severely burnt if he does so unknowingly.

This suggests that an evil action—such as intentionally killing a living being (Miln.158)—is the worst if it is done without hesitation, restraint or compunction. This will be the case if an action is not seen to be wrong, as there will be no holding back on the volitional force put into the action.

In an English court of law, the “ring-leader” of a crime is often punished more harshly than those who were led on, half-reluctantly. The leader may well be held to see no wrong in the action—e.g. by showing no remorse—but the others have some compunction.

Relevant to this is the case of doing a so-called “necessary evil”, for example killing an enemy to prevent one’s country being invaded. Here, a recognition that such an act is still evil is preferable to a glorifying in the act. Indeed, some of the worse crimes of the twentieth century have been carried out under the banner of an ideology which saw them as “right” actions.

Here, wrong physical action is both accompanied by and strengthened by wrong view. Therefore, the Buddha says that attachment to wrong views is far worse than attachment to material things, because you can even sacrifice your life for your ideology.

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<th>Degree</th>
<th>Crime -- intention and knowledge</th>
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<tr>
<td>Least</td>
<td>An action performed without intention and knowledge,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesser</td>
<td>Knowing a certain kind of action is evil, but out of control of oneself e.g. drunk or impassioned.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Less</td>
<td>Not clear or mistaken about the object affected by the action.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>Full intention, fully knowing, and knowing that the action is evil. Result in bad karmic results, particularly if it is premeditated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worst</td>
<td>Full intention, fully knowing, and knowing that the action is evil, but do not recognize that one is doing wrong.</td>
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5.1. Parallel degree of wholesomeness in action

Parallel things of wholesomeness in action could mostly be said for good actions:

1) an unintentionally beneficial action is not to one’s credit;
2) a beneficial action done when one was in a disturbed state is only of little credit;
3) an action done when one is unsure there is someone to benefit from it is moderately good;
4) an intentional good action is straightforwardly good.
The parallel breaks down at 5), though: if one thinks that a right action is a wrong one but still does it, one will do it with compunction, such that it is a less good action than it would otherwise be. This perhaps shows the potency of “right view”.

A partial “good” parallel to 5) would be doing a truly good action even though others say it is a bad one. Here, great determination is needed, so the action can be seen as a very good one. (Harvey)

An example, here, is given at the Atthasālinī (The Expositor), 103 (A commentary to the Dhammasangani). A young boy is told to catch a hare to feed as medicine for his sick mother; he could not do so, though, for he intuitively recognized that it was wrong to kill.

According to the Mahācattārisaka Sutta (Sutta No.117) as a wholesome mental action, right view is defined as holding that good and bad actions do have results beyond this life, and that spiritually developed people have knowledge of such things, wrong view being to deny this:
1) there is gift, there is offering, there is sacrifice;
2) there is fruit and ripening of deeds well done or ill done;
3) there is this world, there is a world beyond;
4) there is mother and father;
5) there are spontaneously arising beings;
6) there are in this world ascetics and brahmans who are faring rightly, practising rightly, and who proclaim this world and the world beyond having realized them by their own super-knowledge. (M. III.72, numbers added)

§ 6. The significance of Buddhist ethics

From the above criteria of judging wholesome and unwholesome actions, we can see the following significances of Buddhist ethics.

First, the Buddha is only a Religious Teacher who did not claim Divinity and therefore, the final judgment of an action is not with the Buddha as an authority of Moral Order. Buddhism is descriptive not prescriptive, because in Buddhism there is no law giver.

This will be understood when we look at the Western theory of ethics. One of the theories in metaethics in Western ethics is named divine commands which means morality issues from God’s will. (Fieser, “Ethics”)

Sometimes “called voluntarism, this view was inspired by the notion of an all-powerful God who is in control of everything. God simply wills things, and they become reality. He wills the physical world into existence, he wills human life into existence and, similarly, he wills all moral values into existence. Proponents of this view, such as medieval philosopher William of Ockham, believe that God wills moral principles, such as “murder is wrong,” and these exist in God’s mind as commands. God informs humans of these commands by implanting us with moral intuitions or revealing these commands in scripture.” (Fieser, “Ethics”)
But Buddhist moral law is a natural law, like the law of physics, not operated by God. Indeed, gods themselves are subjects to this natural law as well. Therefore, good and bad rebirths are not seen as “rewards” and “punishment”, but as simply the natural results of certain kinds of action.

In Buddhist ethics, the Buddha is only a teacher who describes the moral relationship between actions and their consequences.

So Buddhism does not recognize the original sin or evil in man as nothing is permanent and everlasting. A bad person can one day be transformed into a virtuous one and can even attain enlightenment.

In Buddhism hell and heaven are not permanent. Beings in hell will be reborn somewhere according to their deeds when they die there and in the same way, beings in heaven can even be reborn in hell if they have bad deeds.

Therefore, the Buddha’s criticism of people is not couched in terms of them being evil or sinful, but usually in terms of them being a “fool”. Fool in the sense that they are covered by ignorance.

It is said that a person is known as a “fool” by immoral conduct of body, speech and mind, just as a wise person is known by moral conduct, and that the fool does not recognise a transgression for what it is (A.I.102-03), nor to accept another person’s acknowledgement of having committed a transgression (A.I.59).

That is, it is good to see one’s own faults and pardon those of others. Indeed, “a fool who knows he is a fool is to that extent a wise person; the fool who thinks he is wise is called a fool indeed”. (Dhp.63)

Given this, it is clear that one is, for example, doing a slaughterer a favour if one tries to get him to see that what he is doing is wrong (though to do so in an aggressive manner is unwholesome as it is an expression of ill-will). Even if he carries on in his trade, he is better off if he is at least uneasy about what he is doing.

Second, since the teaching of the Buddha, Dhamma, is not a Divine Revelation from either God or Brahma, so the dhamma is not to be taken as a ritual.

Therefore, Buddhist Ethics is not a mere moral ritual. The Buddha says that merely adhering to ritual or rites is bad. So any formalism is bad, because your moral life must not become a burden to others, otherwise, you are virtue made (silamaya).

So you must not condemn others who do not follow what you do and adhere merely to moral ritual, but you should be virtuous (silavanta). Merely rites and ritual serve as a basic refuge.
But the Buddhist perfection is based on wisdom and understanding. If a man is pure, he should know that he is pure, if he does not know that he is pure, he is not pure. In the same way, a man is liberated, he must know that he is liberated, otherwise, he is not liberated.

A man is virtuous, he must know that he is virtuous, if he does not know that he is virtuous, he is not virtuous, because the Buddhist ethics is not like the innocence of a baby. A baby's innocence is due to ignorance. But the Buddhist ethics is based on understanding and wisdom. So the Buddhist perfection should be cultivated. Therefore, if a man is real wise, he is also compassionate.

Third, in Buddhist Ethics there is no authority to judge your action, but it works on Psychological bases, your mind.

As the Buddha says: “Monks, volition, I say, is karma, having willed one expresses in words, deeds and mind.” (A. III. 415)

So according to this passage, the mind is important and only intentional actions expressed in words, deeds and mind are counted as morally effective, not otherwise. In other words, only intentional actions are morally good or bad.

Fourth, there is no distinction between your own good and the good of others in Buddhist ethics. Because if I eliminate from my inner assessment greediness (lobha), hatred (dosa) and delusion (moha), the possibility of my harming others is no more, but on the other hand, the possibility of healing other is there.

Therefore, if I am free from my own self, it also has an influence on the society in which I live. It is said that one who protects oneself protects others, and one who protects others protects oneself. Because when one comes to morality, ethics, one frees oneself from the impurity of mind; it is not only benefit for oneself, but benefit for others too.

That is why those who observe the five precepts are said to give the highest form of giving to others: fearlessness.

Therefore, there is no contradiction between your own good and the good of others. Therefore, the accusation brought against Theravāda Arahantship of ego-centric idea is wrong, because Arahantship is achieved by eliminating the very selfishness.

It is only by eliminating the selfishness, you achieve that end. The idea of selfishness does not operate in vacuum, but in society. All the evils have a social dimension. Though the idea arises in you, but the idea is against someone else.

§ 7. Precepts-taking and morality

A question may raise whether it is worse to do an unwholesome action when i) one has formally undertaken not to do so, or ii) when one has not so undertaken.
There is no direct answer to this question in the text, but if one undertakes the precept of not stealing, this must be because one recognises that such an action is unwholesome.

If one then breaks the precept, while one does not do so in ignorance of what is right and wrong, one is also breaking a promise: not to steal.

As expressed by Tatz, “To act morally in accordance with a vow is considered more beneficial than to act morally without one, because the moral conduct is associated with progress toward a higher goal”.
(Studies in Asian Thought and Religion, 13)

So taking precept is meaningful because it leads to a higher purpose of spiritual growth.

To break a moral precept which one is generally seeking, and succeeding, to follow, would thus be better than to go against one that one has not formally undertaken.

The Mahayanists developed on this aspect that a psychological substance (戒體 Jianti, precept body) will be formed when one takes a precept. This psychological substance can prevent you from committing offence.

Here, a useful distinction is made by Asaṅga: between the ten unwholesome courses of action (above), which are "reprehensible by nature", and most of the monastic rules, which are "reprehensibly only 'by precept'", as breaking them brings no direct harm to others.

Likewise, the Abhidharma-Kośa (IV.122bc) says that some things are not immoral, but are prohibited by the Buddha for monks, for example eating after noon.

§ 8. The Purpose and Place of Buddhist Ethics in Spiritual Progress

The purpose of Buddhist ethics is the transformation of man's character to a higher level of perfection such an enlightened being.

Buddhist ethics is based on the facts, [1] free will, [2] moral causation: this implies that there is no law giver, moral law operates itself according to Dependent Co-arising, and [3] rebirth: the idea of perfection is more meaningful in the context of rebirth.

If this is the only life available, and life ends at death, then the purpose of leading a moral life does not arise. Actually, every religion has that metaphysical aspect in the human life, though it cannot be proved. Otherwise, religion becomes complete empirical, that cannot be.

The Buddhist path is the Noble Eightfold Path which is of threefold: (1) virtue or ethics, (2) concentration and (3) wisdom. So ethics is an essential ingredient on the path to the final goal.
This is well expressed in a passage in the Rathavīnīta Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya as pointed out by Harvey.

“So too, friend, purity of virtue leads to onward to ‘purity of mind’, this to ‘purity of view’, and this, through various stages of increasing spiritual insight, to ‘utter nirvāṇa without attachment’, ‘unshakeable freedom of mind’.” (M.1149-50, Sutta No.24)

In this practice, the Noble Eightfold Path is a means as well as an end, because at the end you become the path. So you have both wisdom and compassion, because by the end of training, you have attained the final goal, insight, wisdom and at the same time, you are also morally perfected.

So it is, Brahmin. Wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world. (D i. 124. Sonadaṇṇa Sutta)

Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes both Mahakaruna and Mahapañña (great compassion and love) and they go together. They are the two aspects of the same phenomena.

§ 9. Buddhist renunciation is psychological

The Buddhist renunciation does not mean physical renunciation, but psychological. So mental culture is not based on the suppression of sense, but to develop the senses to see things as they truly are (yathābhūta).

This idea is very well brought out in the Anguttara Nikāya (A. iii, 411; G. S. 291) as follows:

In passionate purpose lays man’s sense desire,  
the world’s gain glitters are not sense desire,  
in passionate purpose lays man’s sense desire,  
the world’s gain glitters as they abide,  
but the wise men hold desire, therefore, in check.

Another translation is;

Lustful intention is man’s desire,  
the manifold objects in the world within themselves are not desire of sense,  
the lustful intention in man’s sense desire,  
that manifold objects you endow,  
the will there to the wise exterminate.

So what the Buddha wanted to say is that the manifold objects in the external world do not constitute our desire. What constitute our desire is lustful intention, lustful desire within you, not things themselves, but lustful desire towards them, because equanimity is not lack of interest, but lack of self-interest.
So the true renunciation is not completely withdrawn from the world physically, but the cultivation of particular attitude of mind within you.

That’s why the Buddha returned to the world after enlightenment and he even advised his disciples to go and preach his teachings when there were sixty arahant disciples around him.

In the Anangana Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya, Sariputta, the chief disciple of the Buddha, said that one man might live in a forest devoting himself to ascetic practices, but might be full of impure thoughts and defilements; while the other might live in a village or a town, practicing no ascetic discipline, but his mind might be pure and free from defilements.

Of the two men, the one who lives a pure life in a village or a town is definitely far superior to and greater than the one who lives in forest. (M. I. 30-31)

In the Mahāvacchagotta Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya, the Buddha told Vacchagotta, an ascetic wonderer, that there are not one or two, hundreds of his lay followers were accomplished in his Dhamma while leading a life with sensual pleasures. (M. I. 493)

§ 10. The Psychological Basis of Buddhist Moral Training

According to Professor Karunadasa, there are three layers of moral evil in the mind of everyman.

The first layer: Moral evil lying dormant as latent proclivities (Pāli: anusaya, Skt: anuśaya). The Pāli word anusaya means proclivities, bent, bias, the persistence of a dormant or latent disposition, predisposition, tendency, always in bad sense.

In the oldest texts the word Anusaya usually occurs absolutely, without mention of the cause or direction of the bias.

In the Anguttara Nikāya, a list of seven anusayas is found. They are complying, resisting, view, uncertainty, conceit, worldly lust and ignorance. (A. IV. 9)

So these are the latent evil and the text says that it is by removing these evil mentalities one becomes a perfected person.

And when a monk is rid of these seven fetters, has cut them at the roots, made them as palm-tree stumps, so that they cannot become in the future nor rise again; then is that monk said to have cut off craving, unshackled the fetters, and by understanding conceit in full, made an end of ill. (Gradual Sayings, IV. 6)

At this stage, although the evil forces are there latent in mind, but they do not disturb the peace of the mind, just as the clam sea before a storm.
The second layer: Moral evil activating as turbulent states of mind (*Pariyuṭṭhāna*, Skt: *paryavasthāna*)
The Pāli word means over-exertion, outburst, while the Buddhist Sanskrit means the state of mind being possessed, the heart become possessed by lust as a road by highwayman.

This is the state of the mind when disturbed, the latent forces of evil possessed the mind.

The Bhayabherava Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya gives a good description of such a state of the mind. “When recluses or Brahmins who are (1) covetous and full of lust... I am covetous... (2) ...with a mind of ill will and intention of hate... (3) ... overcome by sloth and torpor... (4) ... overcome with restless and unpeaceful mind... (5) ... uncertain and doubting... (6) ... given to self-praise... (7) ... subject to alarm and terror... (8) ... desirous of gain, honour and renown... (9) ... lazy and wanting in energy... (10) ... unmindful and not fully aware... (11) ... unconcentrated and with stray of minds...” (M. I. 17-20)

The Anguttara Nikāya says when “living with his heart overcome by coveting and wrongful desire... overcome by hatred... overcome by sloth and torpor... overcome by distraction and flurry... overcome by doubt and wavering... he does what he should not.” “That arīya disciple, knowing coveting... casts out the mind’s depravity of coveting...he is of great wisdom...” (A. II. 66)

Although the latent evil forces are awakened in your mind, if you can control them and hold them in check, then there will be no problem.

The third layer: Moral evil manifesting externally as vocal and physical acts (*Vītikkama*). The meaning of the Pāli word is “going beyond”, “transgression”. The commentary of the Dīghanikāya gives another meaning “going on”, “course of time”.

This means the evil forces become manifest in either words or deeds through your mouth and physical body. It is only in such a case it is considered a transgression of rules and regulations.

The Milindapañha says: “O king, should the strenuous monk, earnest in effort, never consciously transgress the precepts for the sake of support, or fame, or praise, or salutations, or reverence, or honour--no! not even for his life. This, O king, is the fourth of the qualities of the sea he ought to have.” (Miln. 380)

The above are the three layers of mind. The first two do not have any impact on society at large, while the last one is morally and collectively manifested and have impact on society.

### 10.1. The Three Dimensions of Buddhist Moral Training

The Buddhist moral training is threefold:

- **Discipline** (Pāli: *Sīla*, Skt: *śīla*)
- **Concentration** (*Samādhi*)
- **Wisdom** (Pāli: *paññā*, Skt: *prajñā*)

The Buddhist moral life begins at the third level as discussed above. That is why it begins with *sīla*, precepts.
Sīla means nature, character, habit, virtuous behavior. In Buddhist training, one practices these moral virtues and be trained in such a way that they become a character or habit in one's behaviors in both words and physical actions.

It is in this respect, the ten moral virtues and the five precepts are mentioned for both lay people and monks. The five precepts in particular are the preliminary trainings in any higher development after conforming to the teaching of the Buddha.

“The five moral precepts are observed not because they are common to all societies and religions, but because they are the strong manifestation of at the third level”, as Professor karunadasa says.

In other words, the five precepts have a strong impact on society at large, so that Buddhist training starts from these five.

The second stage of Buddhist training is concentration aiming at clamming down of the mind when it is disturbed or in a state of turbulence. This is for the second level of mind when the evil forces are possessed the mind.

The most powerful remedy for these is the samatha meditation, the concentration of mind. When the mind is concentrated it can develop to a higher level so that all these evils disappear. The total elimination the roots of these evil need rigorous training and practice.

From meditation, wisdom is achieved and it is the answer to this question.

§ 11. The Role of the Knowledge-Factor in Moral Cultivation

According to Buddhism, moral cultivation must be guided by knowledge and wisdom, and knowledge and wisdom in turn generates virtue. So knowledge and virtue help each other.

Therefore, the morally perfected people know that they are perfected. If they do not know it, then they are not perfected.

Therefore, moral perfection based on ignorance is not moral perfection. If one does not know that he is perfected, he is not perfected, such as a baby or an elephant in the forest.

§ 12. The Noble Eightfold Path and the Practice of Moral Life

The typical Buddhist training taught in early Buddhism is the Noble Eightfold Path, which is also called the Middle Path (Majjhima Paṭipadā).

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Why the Noble Eightfold Path begins with Right View? Because according to the Buddha, nothing is more dangerous than wrong view.

The Buddha says: “Monks, I know not any other single thing so apt to cause the arising of evil states not yet arisen, or, if arisen, to cause their more-becoming and increase, as perverted view.” (A.I.31-2)

Then the Buddha continues: “Monks, one person born into the world is born to the loss of many folk, to the discomfort of many folk, to the loss, discomfort and sorrow of devas and mankind. What person? One who has perverted view. He of distorted view leads many folk astray from righteousness and plants them in unrighteousness. This is the one.” (A.I.31-2)

Here the Buddha refers to Makkhali gosāla, who was one of the six so called heretics in the time of six century B.C. who held the view that there is no causal relation in all things in the world. This breaks the law of moral causation.

What is the right view? Sariputta explains in the Sammaditthi Sutta: “When, friends, a noble disciple understands the unwholesome, the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome, and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma.” (M.III.178-79)

Here the wholesome refers to the Ten Kusala Dhamma (the ten virtues) and the unwholesome refers to the opposite, while the root of unwholesome is greed, hatred and delusion, the root of wholesome is non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

Dogmatic attachment to any view is wrong
Although right view is good, but attachment to right view is also condemned by the Buddha, because dogmatic attachment to any view is wrong.

Because a view is only a guideline to action, even the dhamma is only like a raft. That's why the Buddha says that he does not hold any view.

In fact in the Sallekha Sutta (translated as effacement), the Buddha says, “we shall not misapprehend according to individual views nor hold on to them tenaciously, but shall discard them with ease — thus effacement can be done.” (M.I.43)
In another sutta, the Buddha says: “Bhikkhus, purified and bright as this view is, if you adhere to it, cherish it, and treat it as a possession, would you then understand the Dhamma that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping?” (M.I.260)

It is because dogmatically adhere to any view is detrimental to spiritual path and causes much dispute and suffering according to the Buddha. All views are conceptual models. (black cat, magpie)

Right view leads to right vision. The Buddha says: “For a wise person who arrived at true knowledge, right view springs up. For one of right view, right intention springs up. For one of right intention, right speech springs up. For one of right speech, right action springs up. For one of right action, right livelihood springs up. For one of right livelihood, right effort springs up. For one of right effort, right mindfulness springs up. For one of right mindfulness, right concentration springs up.” (The Connected Discourse of the Buddha, II. 1523-4)

Is the Noble Eightfold Path meant only for those who have renounced the world?

In the Noble Eightfold Path, you do not find any prayer, ritual formalism or worship, ceremony. So it can be accepted by all religions. So it is for both laymen and monks. And what is important is that there is not even the mention of rebirth.

The Noble Eightfold Path discovered by the Buddha Himself is the only way to Nibbāna. It avoids both the extreme of self-mortification that weakens one's intellect, and the extreme of self-indulgence that retards one's spiritual progress.

12.1. The Significance of the Noble Eightfold Path

The Significance of the Noble Eightfold Path is that by following the Noble Eightfold Path one becomes the path at the end. In other words, the Noble Eightfold Path is not a means to an end; it is both the means as well as its end.

Because if the Noble Eightfold Path is a means to an end, then when one gets to the desired end, the means will be given up. But the Noble Eightfold Path is not the case. The Noble Eightfold Path will become the virtue when one get to the end, the liberation.

One cannot skip a step in the Noble Eightfold Path, but to follow the path all through. Because all the factors in the Noble Eightfold Path are necessary for achieve the end.

Two factors are achieved when one follows the path: right knowledge and right liberation.

From this brief account of the path, one may see that it is a way of life to be followed, practiced, and developed by each and every individual. It is self-discipline in body, word and mind, self-development and self-purification.
So it is a path leading to the realization of ultimate reality, to complete freedom, happiness and peace through moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection.

There is even no talk about rebirth. This means that even in this life itself, the noble eightfold path is meaningful.

The Buddhist ethics can be summarized in the following stanza:

- Not to do any evil,
- To cultivate wholesome action,
- To purify one’s mind--
- This is the teaching of the Buddhas (Dhp.183)

§ 13. Appendix

13.1. Ten *Kusala Dhamma* (the ten virtues)

There are 10 moral virtues (*dasa sīla*) which are caused by deeds, words and thought.

There are 3 belonging to physical deeds, they are restraint from:
- Taking life, both of oneself and of others.
- Taking what is not given
- Wrong indulgence in sense pleasure

Four are caused by words:
- Musāvāda – falsehood
- Pisunavāca:
  1. Negative: Restraint from slandering
  2. Positive: He holds himself aloof from calumny. What he hears here, he reports not elsewhere to raise a quarrel against the people here. What he hears elsewhere he reports not here to raise a quarrel against the people there. Thus does he live as a binder together of those who are divided, or encourager of those who are friends; a peacemaker, a lover of peace, impassioned for peace, a peacemaker of words that make for peace.
- Pharusavācā:
  1. Negative: Restraint from harsh words
  2. Positive: Whatever words are blameless, pleasant to the ear, lovely, reaching to the heart, urban, pleasing the people, beloved of the people.
- Samphappalāpa:
  1. Negative: He restrains from frivolous talk and holds himself aloof from vain conversation.
  2. Positive: In season he speaks, in accordance with the facts, works full of meaning, on religion, on discipline of the Order. He speaks at the right time, words worthy to be laid up in one’s heart, fitly illustrated, clearly divided, to the point.

There are three caused by mind:
- Abhijjhā – he restrains from covetousness
Vyāpāda:
1. Negative: He restrains from ill-will, malevolence
2. Positive: He should have benevolent thoughts.

Micchāditthi – He restrains from false or heretical views.

13.2. The Noble Eightfold Path
The Noble Eightfold Path (ariya attangika magga) represents a digest of these moral virtues together with the process of concentration and the development of insight. The eight factors are generally presented thus;

1. Sammāditthi – right view, right understanding: Right understanding is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. In other words, we should understand things as they really are. The keynote of Buddhism is this right understanding. Buddhism, as such, is based on knowledge and not on unreasonable belief.

2. Sammāssamkappa – right thoughts: Right thoughts are threefold; [1] there are the thoughts of renunciation (nikkhamma samkappa) which are opposed to lustful desires, [2] benevolent thought (avyāpāda samkappa) which are opposed to ill-will, and [3] thoughts of harmlessness (avihimsā samkappa) which are opposed to cruelty. These tend to purity of mind.

3. Sammāvācā – right speech: Right speech deals with refraining falsehood, slandering, harsh words, and frivolous talk.

4. Sammākammanta – right action: Right action deals with refraining from killing, stealing, and unchastity.


6. Sammā vāyāma – right effort: Right effort is fourfold namely,
1. The endeavour to discard evil that has already arisen.
2. The endeavour to prevent the arising of unarisen evil.
3. The endeavour to develop unarisen good.
4. The endeavour to promote the good which has already arisen.

7. Sammāsati – right mindfulness: Right mindfulness is also fourfold. It is the mindfulness with regard to body, sensation, mind and Dhamma (phenomena). It does not mean that you stay in consciousness, it means you should stay in self-awareness.

8. Sammāsamādhi – right concentration: Right concentration is the one pointedness of the mind.
Sources and reference


