Introduction to Buddhist Ethics
PPT-1

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Introduction

- Specially, the scholars trained in the western ethics have tried to examine Buddhist ethics in terms of western ethical theories. Interest in Buddhist ethics is ever-growing. As Charles Prebish mentions in his text:

- It seeks to do this in a way that addresses issues which are currently of concern in Western thought on ethics and society, so as to clarify the Buddhist perspective(s) on these and make Buddhist ethics more easily available to Western thinkers on these issues.
Meanings of ethics

- Ethics can be studied in relation to following three aspects:
  
  (1) thought on the bases and justification of moral guidelines (normative ethics), and on the meaning of moral terms (meta-ethics);

  (2) specific moral guidelines (applied ethics)

  (3) how people actually behave (descriptive ethics).
A ‘moral’ statement addresses problems of co-operation among humans. It gives an ‘action-guide’ for individuals and groups so as to initiate, preserve or extend some form of co-operation, by guiding actions, character, emotions, attitudes etc. that impinge on this.

Morality is ‘other-regarding’: focused on the effect of our actions etc. on others.
Religious Ethics

- Broadly, religious-based ethical systems support ethics by motivating and justifying positive other-regarding actions and discouraging actions harmful to others, and strengthening the character-traits which foster moral action.
Non Religious Ethics

- Morality and ethics can exist apart from religion, for example in humanism or utilitarianism, or ethics can be integrated into a religious system. The same prescription, for example ‘do not kill’, may be justified by a purely ethical reason, for example this has a bad effect on the welfare of others, or a purely religious one, for example it is forbidden by God, or a mixture, for example it is forbidden by God because it harms others.
In a Buddhist context, the effect of actions on the welfare of others is itself a key consideration, as is the effect of an action on spiritual progress, and what the Buddha is seen as having said on it. Religions often move imperceptibly from ethical concerns, relating to material welfare of others, to more ‘spiritual’ ones such as self-discipline and renunciation, though these may, in turn, have ethical spin-offs.
Buddhist Morality: Intrinsic

- Ethics and Cosmology

- Let us begin from the understanding about human being. According to the Buddhist cosmological classification, the modes of beings are divided into three terrains, the sense-sphere realm, the fine-material realm and nonmaterial realm. Each of these comprises a range of subsidiary planes, rising to thirty-one places of existence. The realm of sensuous pleasure is formed out of eleven realms.
Above the world of sense pleasure, there is ‘the world of pure form’ (P. rūpadhātu,loka).

The formless world’ (P.arūpadhātu,loka) occupied by a further class of Brahmas who have only consciousness.

All sentient beings are born in one of these three realms according to their ethical conduct they had within the existence. Therefore, the cosmology of Buddhism is a matter of ethics or morality. This is one aspect of the Buddhist concept of morality. It is not confined to the human realm but to any sort of life having sentience.
The discourse *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* discusses how the immorality leads to chaos of the socio-political structure. Due to lapse into the immorality, the human society falls into a place where there is no human values. Consequently, the life span reduces up to ten years. Finally, there is a stage when people begin to perceive each other as beasts and subsequently kill each other for one weak.
As Hari Shankar Prasad points out, the ethicization of human deed (kamma)-mental, verbal and bodily, is the primary concern of the Buddha and his followers, because only through it man can favourably regulate the moral causality (karma-vipāka), the world of action (samsāra), rebirth eschatology and soteriology (nirvāṇa).

A Remark

- Ethics and morals (interchangeably) indicate two major processes:
  - 1. Individual Cultivation
  - 2. Other-regardness
Buddhist Ethics: Rational Basis

- The teachings attributed to the Buddha(s) are seen as an authoritative guide to the nature of reality and the best way to live, based on the vast, meditation-based knowledge of such spiritually ‘awakened’ beings. Such teachings are not to be simply accepted, though, but used, investigated and, as far as is possible for a particular individual, confirmed in experience.

- This emphasis on testing out the teachings is seen in the *Kālāma Sutta* (A.I.188-93). Here, the Buddha advises the Kalama people not to accept teachings simply through tradition, speculative reasoning, personal preferences, what one thinks should be true, or respect for a particular teacher.
To Kalamas

When you, Kalamas, know for yourselves: 'these states are unwholesome and blameworthy, they are condemned by the wise; these states, when accomplished and undertaken, conduce to harm and suffering’, then indeed you should reject them. (p. 189)
Here, the Buddha gets Kalamas to agree that greed, hatred and delusion (lobha, dosa, and moha) are each states which are harmful to a person when they arise. Being overcome by any of them, he or she kills, steals, commits adultery, lies, and leads others to do likewise, so that he or she suffers for a long time (on account of the karmic results of his or her actions, in this life or beyond).
The Kalamas are then led to agree that the arising of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion is beneficial, without such bad consequent actions and results. Accordingly, these states can be seen to be wholesome, unblameworthy, praised by the wise and conducive to happiness, so that the Kalamas should ‘undertake and abide in them’.
Sammaditthi Sutta (MN)- Sphere of Actions: Kusala and Akusala

"And what, friends, is the unwholesome, what is the root of the unwholesome, what is the wholesome, what is the root of the wholesome? Killing living beings is unwholesome... taking what is not given is... misconduct in sensual pleasures... false speech... malicious speech... harsh speech... gossip... covetousness... ill will is unwholesome; wrong view is unwholesome. This is called the unwholesome.

And what is the root of the unwholesome? Greed is a root of the unwholesome; hate is a root of the unwholesome; delusion is a root of the unwholesome. This is called the root of the unwholesome.
And what is the wholesome? Abstention from killing living beings is wholesome; abstention from taking what is not given is wholesome; abstention from misconduct in sensual pleasures is wholesome; abstention from false speech is wholesome; abstention from malicious speech is wholesome; abstention from harsh speech is wholesome; abstention from gossip is wholesome; uncovetousness is wholesome; non-ill will is wholesome; right view is wholesome. This is called the wholesome.

"And what is the root of the wholesome? Non-greed is a root of the wholesome; non-hate is a root of the wholesome; non-delusion is a root of the wholesome. This is called the root of the wholesome.
Moral Cultivation

- One of the important characteristics of ethical theories is internalizing the virtues or rules that guide the individual in his moral conduct. In early Buddhism, this is presented through the Eight-Noble Path. It is divided into three steps as:

  - Sila
  - Samadhi
  - Panna
The eight factors exist at two basic levels, the ordinary (*lokiya*), which leads to good rebirths, and the transcendent (*lokuttara*) or Noble (*ariya*), which builds on this preliminary development to go beyond rebirths, to Nibbana.
Sammaditthi

- Ordinary ‘right view’ (sammaditthi) relates mainly to such matters as karma and rebirth making a person take full responsibility for his or her actions.

- Lokuttara Sammaditthi:

- Noble right view is true wisdom, knowledge which penetrates into the nature of reality in flashes of profound insight, direct seeing of the world as a stream of changing, unsatisfactory, conditioned processes (Samyutta Nikaya).
Sila

Virtues are important as the nuclei of the moral life. They are the stepping stones of the moral life. “Having established oneself in the virtuous, a sagacious one proceed to develop thought (citta=Samādhi) and wisdom (paññā)”. As such, virtues are not sufficient themselves.
Sila in The Path

- From the perspective of the Four Noble Truths, ethics is not for its own sake, but is an essential ingredient on the path to the final goal. This is well expressed in a passage which explains that ‘purity of virtue’ leads onward to ‘purity of mind’, this to ‘purity of view’, and this, through various stages of increasing spiritual insight, to ‘utter Nibbana without attachment’, ‘unshakeable freedom of mind’.
"Friend, when asked: 'But, friend, is it for the sake of purification of virtue that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One?' you replied: 'No, friend.' When asked: 'Then is it for the sake of purification of mind...purification of view...purification by overcoming doubt...purification by knowledge and vision of what is the path and what is not the path...purification by knowledge and vision of the way...purification by knowledge and vision that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One?' you replied: 'No, friend.' For the sake of what then, friend, is the holy life lived under the Blessed One?"

"Friend, it is for the sake of final Nibbana without clinging that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One."
Precepts

- Different Classifications of Precepts
- Patimokkha
1. Having abandoned the destruction of life (pāṇātipāta), the recluse Gotama abstains from the destruction of life...and dwells full of kindness, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.

2. Having abandoned taking what is not given (adinnādāna), the recluse Gotama abstains from taking what is not given. Accepting and expecting only what is given, he dwells in honesty and rectitude of heart.
The Golden Rule

All tremble at punishment,
Life is dear to all.
Comparing others with oneself,
One should neither kill nor cause to kill (*Dhammapada*)
Likewise:
Comparing oneself to others in such terms as ‘Just as I am, so are they, just as they are, so am I’, one should neither kill nor cause others to kill. (*Suttanipata*).
Whoever, seeking his own happiness, Harms with sticks Pleasure-loving beings, He gets no happiness hereafter (Dhammapada).

The benefit of self and other are intertwined, because of the law of karma, so that concern to lessen one’s own suffering goes hand-in-hand with lessening that of others. Helping others helps oneself (in terms of karmic results and good qualities of mind that are developed), and helping oneself (by purifying one’s character) enables one to help others better.
Selecting an action is based on a certain principle. In the early canon, we can observe that two kinds of action guides are present. The first one is that ‘seeing ‘intention as root of moral actions’. According to the Nibbedika Pariyaya sutta in the Anguttara Nikaya:

It is volition (cetana), bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind.
Mental Action

- According to Upali Sutta (MN.I.373), Early Buddhist ethics considers mental action as more important than bodily and verbal action. As the Buddha states:
  
  I describe mental action as more reprehensible for the performance of evil action, for the perpetration of evil action, and not so much bodily action and verbal action.

- However, this does not mean that only intention or motivation constitutes moral actions, but rather that without intention actions do not generate karma. That is, intention is the basic requirement for speaking about moral actions within Buddhism.
This primacy of the mind and intention in early and classical Buddhism seems to indicate that the mental states behind actions are the most important factor to determine the goodness of actions.

Early Buddhist ethics, however, tend to integrate in its criteria of goodness the three factors: motivation and content of actions (wholesomeness, blamelessness) and their consequences (harmless and happy results for oneself and others).
However, the primacy of mental action and intention does not mean that within early Buddhist ethics the consequences or the content of actions are irrelevant for determining the goodness of actions.
In the Ambalaṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta, the Buddha advises his recently ordained son Rahula to reflect before, during, and after performing a bodily, verbal, or mental action:

whether or not an action may “lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or to the affliction of both; it is an unwholesome bodily action...verbal action...mental action with painful consequences, with painful results...

it is a wholesome bodily action...verbal action...mental action with pleasant consequences, with pleasant results.
It is important to see in this text the result/consequence has been taken into consideration based on the nature of the result. That is, happiness or pain. In other words, the criterion tries to minimize suffering for the greatest number, which here is referred to as the affliction of oneself, others, and both oneself and others. This a characteristic similar to Utilitarianism/consequentialist ethics in the west.
Holistic Approach to Criterion

- Following Roy Perret, we can see that the opposition between intentionalism and consequentialism in Western ethical theory does not figure in Buddhist ethics (1987). In other words, the goodness of actions does not depend exclusively on either the goodness of intentions or the goodness of consequences.

- Virtue ethics is certainly present in early Buddhism, and evidently the internal mental state or motivation underlying actions is very important to determine the overall goodness of actions, perhaps the most important from a Buddhist point of view.
However, the intrinsic wholesomeness of certain external bodily and verbal actions, as well as the consequences of these actions for the happiness or suffering of oneself and others, are also extremely important and necessary to assess the goodness of actions.
Social Ethics

- Four Divine Abodes
- Bodhisattva Ideal etc
In the canonical texts, the teachings related to practicing four *Brahmaviharas*: *metta* (loving-kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (sympathetic joy) and have been organized by Acariya Buddhaghosa in his Visuddhimagga. How these virtues are other-regarding can be illustrated as follows:
Loving-kindness (*mettā*) is friendliness towards all sentient beings irrespective of their degree of intimacy to the subject who cultivates this feeling. Compassion (*karuṇā*), the more emphasized aspect of sublime emotions, indicates the empathetic character in the mind when we encounter a person in suffering. The *Visuddhimagga* defines compassion as ‘a sentiment that is being touched by seeing other’s suffering and is also characterized with the making effort to remove the pain of others’ (*paradukkhe sati sādhūnaṃ hadayakampanaṃ karotīti karuṇā. Kiṃati vā paradukkhaṃ hiṃsati vināsetīti karuṇā-Buddhadatta 1914: 242*). The quality of being happy at the joy of others is called sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and the ability to see everything in equality is called equanimity (*upekkhā*).
For a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion (karuna) on one side and wisdom (panna) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for intellectual side of qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a goodhearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-headed intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are linked together (Rahula 1978: 46).
Foundations of social unity (Sangahavatthu)

- giving (dana);
- kindly speech (piya vaca);
- helpful action (attha-cariya);
- impartial treatment and equal participation (samanattata), or evenmindedness to pleasure and pain. (Sigalovada Sutta)
Bodhisattva Ideal

- The Mahayana is focused on the Bodhisattva (Pali Bodhisatta), or Being-for-Enlightenment: one on the path to perfect Buddhahood, whose task is to help beings compassionately while maturing his or her own wisdom.

- The Theravada tradition has developed its concept of Bodhisattva in the late canonical period onwards to the commentarial literature. Buddhaghosa mentions in the Visuddhimagga that aiming at the deliverance of all beings is more perfectly virtuous than working for one’s own deliverance (Vism.13)
Buddhist Ethics and Western Ethics

- Utilitarianism - Happiness
- Virtue Ethics
- Aristotelian Virtue Ethics - Eudaimonia
- Kantian Deontology