

## THE BUDDHIST FOUNDATION OF MORALITY, UNIVERSAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL ETHICS

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In this paper I propose to discuss the very foundation of a culture which is truly universal in application and manifestation taking in its scope not only human beings but the whole nature as well. Such a culture, which will be Buddhist in letter and spirit, looks for a firm foundation not outside a person but inside in him awaiting to be cultivated and developed by transforming his attitude and moral behaviour without taking the help of any divine deity, scripture, and religious person claiming to possess revelatory knowledge. It is an attempt to structure human consciousness to help it rise to its higher level and then to its highest level, the level of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas. In such a state of consciousness, it is believed, a person transcends his selfish good and throughout his life works for the welfare of the entire world. In other words, the whole exercise is aimed at complete reorientation of social ethics and culture which prepares the background for global humanistic education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This culture further gets reflected in all forms of human action, viz., in art and language, speech and deed, and personal discipline and social governance.

This paper criticizes the Vedic and Upaniṣadic notion of culture and morality, or for that matter any such notion, which is grounded in divine power and commandments. Herein the whole construction of a universal culture and social ethics is done by working out certain Buddhist insights which anyone can develop through his personal effort. This is a unique Buddhist approach, unlike other cultural and ethical systems, whose whole thrust is put on understanding the very nature of the existence of man, his predicament, his total personality transformation by transforming his mental

attitude, and achieving excellence in ethical and social practices without any metaphysical and divine foundation or grace. This is an approach which envisages progress in morality through the progress in the evolution of a person.

Morality consists in the whole human behaviour which presupposes the 'other' for its manifestation and fulfillment. It builds interpersonal relationship, structures the whole fabric of a family, community, society, nation and the entire world. It is not only anthropocentric but cosmocentric or ecological as well in nature and concern. It constitutes and defines the entire personality of a person, sets and directs his goal, and instills purpose of life in him. But the crucial questions of paramount importance are: Does morality have its own universal foundation or a Moral Truth which shapes it and justifies its utility and indispensability? And if there is any such foundation, then what is its nature and scope? Is it a universal metaphysical reality or a personal, social and cultural phenomenon? These are some of the questions which I propose to address here in the context of Buddhism, of course, in comparison, rather in contrast, with the Vedic and Upaniṣadic modes of thinking.

It is natural that morality demands a firm foundation. At the same time, it is a well-known historical fact that there are various, even conflicting, ethical systems or systems of morality which presuppose various foundations, each claiming and justifying universality of its own foundation as if it is self-justifying, self-evident, and the only legitimate source of morality and therefore, they maintain, the moral codes of conduct derived from it must be obligatory. This conflicting diversity of claims gives birth to the *problem of ethical indeterminacy* which shows the failure of finding an absolute foundation of morality. Here the thrust is more on "foundation" than on morality". This is also a fact that despite this failure, which is more of an intellectual or academic kind, various kinds of moral systems, even if they are mutually conflicting, are prevailing even today in the world in theory and practice. Before I discuss these issues in Buddhism in detail, I think it is necessary to have a survey of the Vedic notions of the foundation of morality.

### The Vedic and Upaniṣadic Notion on Morality :

The earliest idea of morals we find in the *Ṛg Veda*. It talks of *Rta* which stands for the whole cosmic order including the moral order and the god Varuṇa as its guardian. *Rta* is here considered as an intelligent metaphysical and moral principle which regulates both the cosmos and the individual beings. It is the inexorable moral law operating in the context of *karma* and its *phalas*.<sup>1</sup> The *Ṛg Veda* sets the metaphysical tone by saying that the Upaniṣadic Reality is One Absolute which is professed by scholars differently.<sup>2</sup> It talks of the essential unity of all beings, sentient as well insentient, and claims to achieve the unity of the empirical ontological diversity through intuitive realization. It professes the cherished ideal, on the basis of this metaphysical identity of all beings, that the whole world of human beings is a family,<sup>3</sup> and aspires to create a homogeneous and harmonious world in which there is an unanimity in goal, thinking, speech, feeling, acting, mutual caring etc.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it propounds One, Universal Absolute metaphysical as well as moral Truth necessary for attaining personal liberation and establishing a peaceful and harmonious world. The Upaniṣads take upon themselves the task of elaborating, establishing and promoting the Vedic philosophy. Later the *Bhagavadgītā* contributes to this philosophy by making it more applicable in practical life. It is a self-evident fact for all of us to see that in the Hindu tradition and way of living, its teachings have tremendous influence on the common man. Herein the Lord Kṛṣṇa asks Arjuna, His friend and devotee, to surrender to Him as He is the Supreme God, who is also the absolute metaphysical and moral truth. He means to say that only by being absorbed in Him (*manmayā*) and taking refuge in Him (*mām upāśītā*) that many persons in the past have attained transcendental love for him.<sup>5</sup> One who knows His true nature attains His eternal abode.<sup>6</sup> As all surrender (*prapadyante*) to Him, He rewards them accordingly and so everybody, in every respect (*sarvaśaḥ*) follows Him.<sup>7</sup> According to Him a sceptical person who is ignorant and lacks faith in the revelations of the scriptures does not attain the highest abode, he is doomed to fall and he is in peace neither in this world nor in the next.<sup>8</sup> A moralist who follows the path of revealed scriptures or in other words, who has identified himself with the Supreme Lord, who is a purified soul and who has control over his mental

and sensuous faculties develops mutual loverelationship with others (*sarvabhūtatmabhūtatmā*).<sup>9</sup> Again, only those persons are entitled to attain the Supreme Abode who have transcended the duality, a creation of doubt, who have seen the same Truth in all beings (*ṛṣayaḥ*), who are completely engaged in the welfare of all beings (*sarvabhūtahite ratāḥ*).<sup>10</sup>

All this explains that one is not free to act according to one's own decision and the foundation of morality lies in the revealed scriptures which are the records of divine commands, but it is also to be noted that the welfare of all creatures or beings, which is the aim of the acts of moral practices, is considered the path of the Supreme God leading the practitioner to his Supreme Abode.

Further, in the Vedic tradition, philosophy, religion, and morality are found overlapping and aiming at the same goal, i.e., the realization of one's true identity as the identity of the individual soul (*ātman*) and the Universal Soul (*brahman*). This is taken as the *summum bonum* of one's life. In the empirical sphere this metaphysical doctrine of *ātman* implies an ethical ideal. This metaphysical truth becomes a reason and justification for our love to the other, be he husband, wife, son or any other being sentient (Gods, human beings, animals, plants, etc.) or insentient (wealth, landscape, river, etc.). This is the message we get from Yājñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*.<sup>11</sup> In principle, this passage denies any other consideration than this metaphysical one. Once we realize that this personal soul is Brahman (*ayam ātmā brahma*,<sup>12</sup> *tat tvam asi*<sup>13</sup>), and the whole universe is nothing but this Brahman (*sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*<sup>14</sup>) the extension of 'self' to the 'other' in the realm of moral practices becomes complete. Therefore our primary task is to see, hear and reflect upon this Self.<sup>15</sup> because only by seeing, hearing and reflecting upon this Self that we can know the above fact and behave accordingly. It is believed for sure that once one realizes this fact one transcends selfishness and starts caring for others. Thus we see that in the Vedic tradition, especially in the Upaniṣads, the metaphysical reality becomes the Moral Truth, the source and foundation of morality. In general, the holy scriptures and the seers of truth claim to reveal the same truth and prescribe the ethical training and practices in obligatory tone. This is the most striking fact about the Vedic notion of morality which is mostly instructive, prescriptive, and obligatory

in nature and which turns out to be moral laws. Consequently, we find in the whole tradition various lists of 'what to do' and 'what not to do'. These moral laws are less rigid in the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, but very rigid and invite punitive actions on violation in the *Dharmaśāstras* and *Manusmṛiti*. In the former the metaphysical principle and the fear of God are invoked, but in the latter, in addition to these, even the fear of State authority and Society is invoked, perhaps for the sake of maintaining social order and harmony. Thus the tightening of the grip of the tradition over the individuals becomes complete. The Vedic and the Upaniṣadic prescriptions and advice, as a matter of fact, in practice, constitute the foundation of morality. In case of confusion, doubt, or ignorance in respect of moral laws, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*<sup>16</sup> advises its students to imitate the Brāhmaṇas who are the realized souls and whose behaviour is the source of guidance:

...If there is in you any doubt regarding any deeds, any doubt regarding conduct, you should behave yourself in such matters, as the Brāhmaṇas there (who are) competent to judge, devoted (to good deeds), not led by others, not harsh, lovers of virtue would behave in such cases. ... This is the command (ādeśa). This is the teaching (upadeśa). This is the secret doctrine of the Veda (vedopaniṣat). This is the instruction (anuśāsana).

Above all, the Upaniṣad instructs its students to speak truth (satya) and practice virtue (dharmaṃ cara).<sup>17</sup> Radhakrishnan writes: "[Here] *dharma* means essential nature or intrinsic law of being; it also means the law of righteousness. The suggestion here is that one ought to live according to the law of one's own being"<sup>18</sup> Further, in case of doubt about the behaviour of a Brahman or a Veda-teacher himself, one should be the guide onto oneself as per the *dharma*s prescribed in the Vedas. Following Śaṅkara's warning (*sāvadyāni śiṣṭa-kṛtāny api nokartavyāni*), Radhakrishnan further says: Even with regard to the life of the teacher, we should be discriminating. We must not do the things which are open to blame, even if they are done by the wise."<sup>19</sup> So in case of doubt one is made free to guide oneself but ultimately not outside the established parameters of the Vedic teachings (dharma). This is unlike the freedom one has in the Buddha's teachings which allow, rather encourage everybody to be free from all traditions, beliefs, society, family, teachers, etc., not as a revolt but to know the truth through one's own experiences and reflection.

The *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* has all the three categories of creation-gods, men and demons - under its purview as far as the virtuous practices are concerned. The famous teaching of *da* to them by Prajāpati is claimed to be the mother of all other virtues. It is presumed that these three categories of being are prone to non-virtuous practices, hence they are required to be virtuous. The dialogue between Prajāpati and them as recorded in the Upaniṣad is like this:

1. Three fold offspring of Prajāpati, gods, men and demons, lived with their father Prajāpati as students of sacred knowledge. Having completed their studentship the gods said, 'Please tell (instruct) us sir.' To them then, he uttered the syllable *da* (and asked) 'Have you understood?' They (said) 'We have understood, you said to us "*damyata*" "control yourselves". He said, 'Yes, you have understood.'
2. Then the men said to him, 'Please tell (instruct) us, sir,' To them he uttered the same syllable *da* (and asked) 'Have you understood?' They (said) 'We have understood, you said to us "give".' He said, 'Yes, you have understood.'
3. Then the demons said to him, 'Please tell (instruct) us, sir,' To them he uttered the same syllable *da* (and asked) 'Have you understood?' They (said) 'We have understood, you said to us "*dayadhvam*", 'be compassionate.'" He said, 'Yes, you have understood.' This very thing the heavenly voice of thunder repeats *da, da, da*, that is control yourselves, give, be compassionate. One should practise this same triad, self-control, giving and compassion.<sup>20</sup>

Radhakrishnan writes:

"The gods are said to be naturally unruly and so are asked to practice self-control. ...Men are naturally avaricious and so they should distribute their wealth to the best of their ability. ...The demons are cruel, given to inflicting injury on others, they should have compassion and be kind to all."<sup>21</sup>

Following Śaṅkara he further writes:

"It is suggested that there are no gods or demons other than men. If they are lacking in self-control while endowed with other good qualities, they are gods, if they are particularly greedy they are men, if they are cruel and given to inflicting injury on others, they are demons. Men themselves are distinguished into these three classes according to their lack of self-control

and the possession of other defects or according to the tendencies of the three, *guṇas*.<sup>22</sup>

Although the Upaniṣad is didactic in nature, but at the same time clearly conveys the message that there is a scope for man within him to rise from demonliness to godliness, and from there to the self-transcendence to Brahman, the state of only 'good'. This also shows the progress of morality in man, the culmination of which is nothing but the nature of his true being, the Being of Brahman, the all encompassing Reality, the Supreme Value. What appears transcendent is shown to be immanent in him. This has been variously said in the Upaniṣads: *ayamātmā brahma*,<sup>23</sup> *ahaṃ brahmāsmi*,<sup>24</sup> *tat tvam asi*,<sup>25</sup> and *sarvaṃ khalvidaṃ brahma*.<sup>26</sup> In the Upaniṣadic teaching what is ethical is stated to be ontological. They propound the doctrine of ethics of self-realization, knowing oneself in true sense. To what extent the equation of metaphysics and ethics brings change in the attitude and behaviour of man, who elsewhere in the same set of literature is shown to be determined by such factors as his irreversible hereditary and hierarchical status in the society is a mute question.

But in Śaṅkara,<sup>27</sup> ethics is asocial, selfish, and just a means to the ultimate end of self-realization, a state of passivity. I am surprised whether, outside the social context, it can be called ethics at all. In his philosophy, the so-called ethical training acquires the most rigorous and uncompromising character. He goes even further and maintains that these ethical practices are not sufficient. These are just one of the four requirements which an aspirer (*adhikārin*) must fulfill before he is initiated into the process of self-realization. These requirements are:

1. *nityānityavastuviveka*, i.e., capacity to discriminate between what is eternal and what is non-eternal or contingent.
2. *Ihāmutrārthaphalahogavirāga*, i.e. renunciation of desire of both worldly and trans-worldly nature.
3. *śamadamādisādhanasampat*, i.e. endowed with six virtues like quietude (*śama*), self-restraint (*dama*), withdrawal from worldly activities (*uparati*), endurance (*tīkṣṇā*), meditation (*samādhi*), and faith (*śraddhā*) which purifies the candidate (*adhikārin*) and prepares the background for the dawn of self-realization.

4. *mumukṣutva*, i.e. longing for liberation.

Śaṅkara is condemned by his opponents to be responsible for denigrating the world of action and the social emotions. “[T]o the charge that Advaita fails to give a proper place to love for one’s fellow man, modern apologists sometimes answer that, because Advaita teaches that there is only one Self, and because everyone loves his own self, which is identical with the one Self, it follows that everyone loves everyone else’s self. That this argument is not found in early Advaita is, I believe, entirely to its credit, for the argument is quite fallacious. ...Still, it may be retorted, at least the Self-knower must love his fellow man, since what he knows is precisely that his is the one Self. But that doesn’t follow either. To love one’s fellow man one must presumably recognize him as one’s fellow, but that means to distinguish him from oneself, and for the liberated man there are no distinctions.”<sup>28</sup>

There are passages in the Upaniṣads which show divinely revelatory nature of everything, including the moral principles:

1. As a spider moves along the thread, as small sparks come forth from the fire, even so from this Self come forth all breaths, all worlds, all divinities, all beings. Its secret meaning is the truth of truth. Vital breaths are the truth and their truth is It (self).<sup>29</sup>
2. As from a lighted fire laid damp fuel, various (clouds of) smoke issue forth, even so, my dear, the *Rg Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sāma Veda*, Atharvāṅgīrasa, history, ancient lore, sciences, *Upaniṣads*, verses, aphorisms, explanations and commentaries. From this [mahad *bhūta*: the Great Reality], indeed, are all these breath forth.<sup>30</sup>
3. [Parting advice to the pupil] This Brahmā told to Prajā-pati, Prajā-pati, to Manu, Manu to mankind. He who has learned the Veda from the family of a teacher according to rule, in the time left overdoing work for the teacher, he, who after having come back again, settles down in a home of his own, continues the study of what he has learnt and has virtuous sons, he who concentrates all his senses in the self, who practises non-hatred to all creatures except at holy places, he who behaves thus throughout his life reaches the Brahmā-world, does not return hither again, yea, he does not return hither again.<sup>31</sup>
4. Brahmā arose as the first among the gods, the maker of the universe, the



protector of the world. He taught the knowledge of brahman, the foundation of all knowledges, to Atharvan, his oldest son.<sup>32</sup>

According to the *Kāṭha Upaniṣad*, for the realization of one's true Self, it is imperative that the seeker thoroughly purifies himself in moral terms. It says, "Not he who has not desisted from evil ways, not he who is not tranquil, not he who has not a concentrated mind, not even he whose mind is not composed can reach this (self) through right knowledge."<sup>33</sup> In the same chapter, in the preceding passage, it also talks of the extra-moral factor, like the divine grace of self's own choice without which the moral perfection becomes inconsequential. It says, "This self cannot be attained by instruction, nor by intellectual power, nor even through much hearing. He is to be attained only by the one whom the (self) [of the God in the self] chooses. To such a one the self reveals his own nature."<sup>34</sup> In other words, even the realization of the identity of the self and the other, which is the foundation of morality in the Vedic and Upaniṣadic tradition, is not within the personal effort of human beings. Throughout this tradition we find many such conflicting and confusing passages. It is because of this that the Buddha look for the foundation of morality within the person himself.

In the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*,<sup>35</sup> while discussing Brahman and the process of evolution therefrom, there is a discussion of the five sheaths (kośa)- matter (anna), life (prāṇa), mind (manas), intelligence (vijñāna), and bliss (ānanda) wherein the soul of a person resides:

1. This, verily, is the person that consists of the essence of food.<sup>36</sup>

2. Verily, different from and within that which consists of the essence of food is the self that consists of life. By that this is filled. This, verily, has the form of a person.<sup>37</sup>

3. This - life - is indeed the embodied soul of the former - physical sheath. Verily, different from and within that which consists of life is the self consisting of mind. By that this is filled. This, verily, has the form of a person.<sup>38</sup>

4. Verily, different from and within that which consists of mind is the self consisting of understanding. By that this is filled. This, verily, has the form of a person.<sup>39</sup>

5. Verily, different from and within that which consists of understanding is the self consisting of bliss. By that this is filled. This, verily, has the form of a person.<sup>40</sup>

These are the five hierarchical principles of a human being representing "his body, his subconscious, conscious and self-conscious life,

and last, a still higher grade of existence which he sometimes manifests, as for instance, when he is contemplating the true and the holy.<sup>41</sup> In the present context, the first two-*anna* and *prāṇa* - fall outside the moral realm as they lack the element of mind a conscious principle. The last one, bliss (*ānanda*), is a sheath wherein the soul transcends the realm of duality and the realm of ethical practices which presupposes the duality of 'good' and 'evil'. In him, the evil is overcome, and thus for him its relative term 'good' is also meaningless. But for worldly people he is the epitome of only 'good'. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* says:

Him (who knows this)\_ these two (thoughts) do not overcome, for some reason he has done evil or for some reason he has done good. He overcomes both. What he has done or what he has not done does not burn (affect) him ...Having found that, one is not tainted by evil action. Therefore he who knows it as such, having become calm, self-controlled, withdrawn, patient and collected sees the Self in his own self, sees all in the Self. Evil does not overcome him, he overcomes all evil. Evil does not burn (affect) him, he burns (consumes) evil. Free from evil, free from taint, free from doubt he becomes a knower of Brahṁā.<sup>42</sup>

Now the third and the fourth -mind (*manas*) and intelligence (*vijñāna*) - are the most important and cardinal principles which are related to the ethical issues and training. Of these two, mind is an inner faculty of perception endowed with the conceptualizing and discriminatory characteristics.<sup>43</sup> It is a passive receptor in the sense that it is externally guided by the commands of the holy scriptures like the Vedas and the Brāhmanas, and the holy seers (*ṛṣi*) of the divine laws of morality. (In the family and educational institutions, the young ones are commanded by parents and teachers respectively as per the tradition.) At this stage, the person, since his childhood until he acquires the grown up stage of intelligence and develops the capacity of reason, to analytically/critically think of ethical issues like 'What are good and evil' and 'What are right and wrong'. It is the stage of initiation of ethical training and practices conforming to the obligatory and revelatory moral rules as enunciated by the holy scriptures and the holy seers. "In one sense, no doubt," writes Hirianna following the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* cited above, "the latter [intelligence] alone is genuine moral life; but the former [mind] is not

therefore to be counted unnecessary; for right conduct is at first learnt through obedience to external law. That is how moral education begins and it is only by and by that one comes to practice virtue in its twofold aspect of purity of thought (*ṛta*) and purity of deed (*satya*) through a belief (*śraddhā*) in its intrinsic worth"<sup>44</sup>In this vein, the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says, "the *Yajur Veda* is its head; the *Rg Veda* the right side; the *Sāma Veda* the left side; teaching the body; the hymns of the Atharvans, and Aṅgirasas, the lower part, the foundation."<sup>45</sup>

So a person, since his birth and childhood grows under the shackles of the external authorities and is molded accordingly in respect of all sorts of behaviour-mental, vocal, and physical. He is in true sense a mechanical person as programmed by them.

The fourth stage, i.e. intelligence, is actually the true stage of rationally conscious morality which is supposed to involve, in today's language, reason, freedom of choice, and responsibility for what one does. But according to the *Upaniṣad*, before intelligence starts functioning it has first to develop faith (*śraddhā*) in the divine revelation contained in the holy scriptures. The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* says, "Faith is its head; the sight its right side, the true its left side, contemplation its body, the great one, i.e. the principle of *Mahat*, the foundation."<sup>46</sup>

So the Principle of intelligence in the *Upaniṣad* is the principle of reason but not in the sense we understand it today as that which allows, rather, encourages to question the very presuppositions, explore various possibilities, metaphysical and knowledge claims, absoluteness and obligatory nature of ethical practices, ways of training, and the need to transcend all these in order to realize one's true being, viz., Brahman, the Only Universal Being, which itself cannot be challenged by its own creation intelligence/reason because of its incapacity and limitedness. The self-realization of one's own being by intuitive method, not by intelligence, and thus the transcendence of the realm of morality means that "the sphere of morality is narrower than the sphere of life."<sup>47</sup>

It is now clear that the *Upaniṣadic* notion of morality, although it talks of intelligence/reason, is authoritative/divine/revelatory in nature. Here reason is supposed to function under the reign of faith in the revelation of

the scriptures (as the body of ultimate knowledge) and the seers (who have realized for themselves the Truth) so that faith is further strengthened and assumes the absolute foundation of morality. So the task of reason is to rationally reestablish what has already been revealed in the scriptures. Rationality is structured by the reason as the situation demands. The suitable empirical and non-empirical evidences are corroborated. The Upaniṣad ethical training is so comprehensively and rigorously designed that it captivates and reigns the very being of a person from birth to death, claiming even to regulate the future life. It does so at every stage of a person's existence - mental or intellectual, vocal or physical, personal or social. A person's natural instincts are controlled and given a set direction, his consciousness (of course, empirical consciousness) is structured in a particular way, the purpose and meaning of his life are defined, his perception is radically transformed, religious faith is changed into epistemological beliefs. That is to say, what is external authority is transformed into internal authority. He sees, thinks, speaks, physically acts, and wants what has been taught to him. This shows he is not free to realize his own self or being independent of external authorities, he is not a free moral agent, he loses his true identity and is made to believe that his true identity is what the holy scriptures say.

The Vedic tradition talks of classification of *karmas* in various ways. The one among many ways is to classify it as *nitya*, *naimmitika*, and *kāmya karmas*. The *nitya karmas* are regular and obligatory in nature like taking bath, performing *agnihotra*, etc. The last two are optional, but they have been practised in such a manner that they sound obligatory. This can be seen in the context of legitimization of the classification of *varṇa*, *Jāti*, *āśrama*, and *nitya-naimittika-kāmya karmas* in the Vedic tradition. This legitimization is done on the firm belief that this classification is divine, factual, natural and hereditary. This in turn has given rise to the rigorous hierarchical system in the society. In such cases, the supposed divine metaphysical grounds are considered more important than the ethical grounds, except in some exceptional cases. This has been a major point of fierce controversy between the Vedic and non-Vedic traditions like Buddhism, Jainism and the materialists. In Buddhism, all such classifications are based on the progress of morality in the persons. A person is classified

differently on the basis of his ethical level he achieves at different stages of his life. Its whole emphasis is on the primacy of progressive ethics over the primacy of "The Being or Self" and the ethics determined by this metaphysical Reality and other revelatory factors. These are the reasons why the Buddha and the Buddhists criticize many of the ethical teachings of the Vedas and the Upaniṣad, especially those teachings which are loaded with obligatory and revelatory colour. I now propose to discuss this and some more issues along with the Buddhist notion of morality

### **The Buddhist Notion of Morality and its Critique of the Vedic and Upaniṣadic Ethics :**

The Buddhist attitude toward the Vedic and Upaniṣadic concept of ethics or morality is generally critical. In the various Pali *Suttas* the Buddha is said to have opposed it because of its divine and revelatory nature, perhaps also because it promotes religious fanaticism and fundamentalism at the cost of the immediate concern toward the fellow beings. This has become self-evident and ubiquitous in most parts of today's world.

In the Vedic tradition (*Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upaniṣads*), we find numerous instances of claims to revelation, very often inconsistent and mutually conflicting. The *Tevijja Sutta*<sup>48</sup> narrates a story about such conflicting claims about "the straight path to the union with Brahmā", a path of salvation, by the distinguished and wealthy Brāhmaṇas, two of whom are Pokkharasādi and Tārukkha, whose staunch followers are Vāsettha and Bhāradvāja. The latter two Brāhmaṇas, who are contemporary to the Buddha, develop a difference of views about the above matter. They approach the Buddha for resolution of the conflict. They want to know which one is the straight and true path and which the false or whether various paths are true and lead to the same goal. The Buddha asks Vāsettha, "Is there a single one of the Brāhmaṇas versed in the three Vedas? or a single one of their teachers, or the teacher of their teachers (up to seven generations), ṛṣi of the Vedas, who has seen Brahmā face to face? To this, Vāsettha replies in negative. The Buddha says such view has been handed down from teachers to pupils, from generation to generation. To talk about the straight path to liberation leading into the state of the union with Brahmā without having seen and known him is a foolish

talk. Invoking, praying and praising Gods, and mere hoping to cross a swollen river, not practising those qualities which really make a man Brāhmaṇa, and being infatuated by various kinds of lust, will never liberate a person or a Brāhmaṇa. The Buddha emphasizes the importance of the purity of mind and the practice of the five śīlas in order to liberate oneself and be happy.

The Veda is by definition considered to be the body of revelatory knowledge which among other things also claims to reveal the consequences of various moral practices. The Buddha, considering himself as a human being and not a divine revealer of truth, ridicules any claim to divine revelation on the ground that such claims are simply impossible for any human being.<sup>49</sup> The Buddha time and again says that "One is one's own refuge, who else could be the refuge."<sup>50</sup> He claims to be only a teacher who shows the way.<sup>51</sup> According to him, a person has to tread his path himself, he is capable of liberating himself from his bondage. In the *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, he asks his followers to take his teaching merely as a raft which helps cross over a river after which one should not keep hold of it or carry it over his head.<sup>52</sup> When asked what kind of teacher he is, he replies:

I, Bhāradvāja, say that there is a difference among those who claim that, in regard to the fundamentals of the Brahma-faring, they have attained here-now to excellence and to go beyond through super-knowledge. There are, Bhāradvāja, some recluses and brahmins who depend on report [*anussavika*], these claim that it is through report that, in regard to the fundamentals of the Brahma-faring, they have attained here-now to excellence and to going beyond through super-knowledge - such as the three-Veda-brahmins. But there are, Bhāradvāja, some recluses and brahmins who with only mere faith claim that, in regard to the fundamentals of the Brahma-faring, they have attained here-now to excellence and to going beyond through super-knowledge - such as reasoners and investigators [*takki-vimamsī*]. There are, Bhāradvāja, some recluses and brahmins who by fully understanding *dhmma* of themselves only [i.e. not learning it or hearing it from others], although these truths had not been heard before, they have attained here-now to excellence and to going beyond through super-knowledge. Now, Bhāradvāja, I am one of those recluses and brahmins who by fully understanding *dhmma* of themselves only, although

these truths had not been heard before, claim that, in regard to the fundamentals of the Brahma-faring, they have attained here-now to excellence and to going beyond through super-knowledge. You must understand it in this way, Bhāradvāja, that I am one of those recluses and brahmans who by fully understanding *dhamma* of themselves only, although these truths had not been heard before, claim that, in regard to the fundamentals of the Brahma-faring, they have attained here-now to excellence and to going beyond through super-knowledge.<sup>53</sup>

In the *Cankī Sutta*, the Buddha talks of five things which have the double characters of being true and false or empty:

These five things, Bhāradvāja, have a twofold maturing here-now. What five? faith, inclination, report, consideration of reasons, reflection on and approval of an opinion. These, Bhāradvāja, are the five things having a maturing here-now. Moreover, Bhāradvāja, even although something be thoroughly believed in, it may be empty, void, false; on the other hand, something not thoroughly believed in may be fact, truth, not otherwise. Moreover, Bhāradvāja even although something may be thoroughly inclined towards. . . well reported. . . well considered. . . well reflected upon, it may be empty, void, false, on the other hand, even although something is not well reflected upon, it may be fact, truth, not otherwise. Preserving a truth, Bhāradvāja, is not enough for an intelligent man inevitably to come to the conclusion: 'This alone the truth, all else is falsehood.'<sup>54</sup>

In this *sutta*, the Buddha advises Bhāradvāja to go beyond these five things and first develop intuitive wisdom and an awakening to truth. He says, "There is attainment of truth, Bhāradvāja, by following, developing and continually practising these things themselves."<sup>55</sup>

In the *Lohikā Sutta*, the Buddha criticizes the monopoly of the Brāhmaṇas in Vedic learning and holy practices, their divine exclusive right and claim over the intellectual tradition and their divinely superior status over other castes. He questions the hereditary criterion of superiority and propounds that without any religious pre-qualifications one is entitled to learning, teaching and practicing a particular way of life. The only requirement for these acts is that one has to develop oneself in terms of merit accordingly. This should be the guiding principle of deciding one's qualification in such matters. The Buddha is very concerned about the

welfare of others. In his opinion, a liberated 'self' must work to liberate others. This is an extension of self to the other and serves a social purpose. In this *Sutta*, the Buddha converses with Lohikka, the Brāhmaṇa, who raises a question: Why should a Samaṇa or Brāhmaṇa, having achieved a good state of mind, should bother about others who will be of no use for him? The Buddha replies that this kind of thinking or teaching is dangerous and creates enmity for others, and is therefore an unhealthy or unsound doctrine. The dialogue between the Buddha and Lohikka goes like this:

'Then suppose, Lohikka, one were to speak thus: King Passendi of Kosala is in possession of Kāsi and Kosala. Let him enjoy all the revenue and all the produce of Kāsi and Kosala, allowing nothing to anybody else.' Would the utterer of that speech be a danger-maker as touching the men who live in dependence on King Pasendi of Kosala-both you yourself and other- or not?'

'He would be a danger-maker, Gotama.'

'And making that danger, would he be a person who sympathised with their welfare, or not?'

'He would not be considering their welfare, Gotama.'

'And not considering their welfare, would his heart stand fast in love toward them, or in enmity?'

'In enmity, Gotama.'

'But when one's heart stands fast in enmity, is that unsound doctrine, or sound?'

'It is unsound doctrine, Gotama.'<sup>56</sup>

In the same *Sutta*, the Buddha talks of three kinds of teachers who are blameworthy and identifies himself with that teacher, who having achieved excellence in ethical practices, guides his disciples to attain the same distinction and excellence.<sup>57</sup> In other words, only that teacher is praiseworthy who, unlike some of the Upaniṣadic realized souls, do not become passive by transcending 'good' and 'evil' practices. Such teacher cares for others; he always practises 'good' and teaches other to practice the same. He suggests union with the four *brahma-vihāras* - benevolence (*matī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) - rather than vainly seeking union with imaginary Brahmā, the



so-called metaphysically absolute reality.

In the *Kālāma Sutta*,<sup>58</sup> a confusion is created in the minds of the Kālāma princely sons of the Kesaputta by the situation wherein different views are propounded by different teachers. The Buddha advises them to be guided by their own experience of what is good for themselves as well as others. This should be the only moral consideration to overcome such confusions. The same issue has been discussed in the *Ambalatthikā-Rāhulovāda Sutta*<sup>59</sup> where the Buddha answers his son's query as to what constitutes 'good'. Rāhula is advised to be reflective about his conduct whether it is wholesome both to himself and others. These *Suttas* show that the Buddha himself, as a teacher, does not decide what is good and what is evil. He, contrary to the Vedic prescriptions, does not set any command about human behaviour. He leaves it to the person himself to reflect on the matter and to be guided by the principle of wholesomeness of moral consequences. This strategy brings psychological transformation in the person, a progress in his moral attitude and behaviour. The Buddha wants to see everybody to become guide unto oneself. His advice to one and all is to follow the middle path, a path of avoiding the two extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence.<sup>60</sup> In ethical sphere, the middle path is the Noble Eightfold Path. In brief, according to the Buddha, moral behaviour should not be blindly guided by the so-called divine revelations, scriptures or holy teachers, one should first develop one's own reflective conscience taking into consideration the wholesome consequences of his behaviour for both oneself and others. For him, the foundation of morality is within the person himself which is to be cultivated and developed. This foundation does not lie in any religious, divine, legal or social commandments as we find in the Vedic, Judaeo-Christian and Islamic traditions.

In Buddhism, there is an advocacy of the gradual development of a person on the line of the gradual progress in morality which is not confined to mere external obligatory, legal or social behaviour. A person's development is nothing but his moral progress. It is in progressive stages like a long journey which requires a relay of seven chariots, the first one taking the traveler from the starting point up to the second one, the second one up to the third one and so on up to the seventh one which ultimately

takes him to the destination. Likewise, a man's ultimate destination is nibbāna, a state of complete freedom, wisdom, moral perfection and universal compassion. This is the state of a person who tirelessly works for the welfare of the entire humanity, even for the non-human creatures. It is in this vein that the *Rathavinā Sutta* says:

.. purity of moral habit is of purpose as far as purity of mind, purity of mind is of purpose as far as purity through crossing over doubt, purity through crossing over doubt is of purpose as far as purity of knowledge and insight into the Way and what is not the Way, purity of knowledge and insight into the Way and what is not the Way is of purpose as far as purity of knowledge and insight into the course, purity of knowledge and insight into the course is of purpose as far as purity arising from knowledge and insight, purity of arising from knowledge and insight is of purpose as far as utter nibbāna without attachment.<sup>61</sup>

From the preceding discussion, it is amply clear that the Buddha put maximum emphasis on the self-effort and self-realization in the matter of moral development of a person. This development, according to him, envisages the true manifestation of human nature which in its essence is endowed with loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. It is further required to be wholesome in nature and application and achieved without being dependent on any external agency, divine or human. This means that the transformed and wholesome attitude of a person itself is the true foundation of morality which equally takes care of both the self and the other. In this scheme, moral behaviour of a person is supposed to be guided by only one factor, i.e. the immediate concern in a given situation which demands immediate expression of one's moral practice. This kind of concern rejects the demand of irrelevant and false notions of such identities like religion, caste, creed, ideology, nationality, and gender.

#### NOTES

Translation of all the *Upaniṣad* and Pali passages are taken from S. Radhakrishnan's *The Principal Upaniṣads*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1974 (hereafter SR, for Sanskrit passages too) and the Pali Texts Society (hereafter PTS) editions respectively.

1. *Rg Veda*, I.1.8; I.2.8; I.84.4; I.105.12; II.23.15; IV.23.8, 10.
2. *ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti. Rg Veda*, I, 164. 46.
3. *vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam. Hitopadesh, Samdhi, Katha is, Kā: 133.*
4. *Rg Veda*, X.191.2-4.
5. *Bhagavadgītā*, IV.10: *Vītarāgabhayakrodhā manmayā mān upaśītāḥ / bahavo jñānatapasā pūtāmadbhāvabhāgatāḥ //*
6. *Ibid.*, IV.9 : *Janma karma ca me divyam evaṃ yo vetti tattvataḥ / tyaktvā dehaṃ punar janma naiti mam eti so rjuna //*
7. *Ibid.*, IV.11: *ye yathā māṃ prapadyante taṃstathaiva bhajamyaham / mama vartmānuvartante manuṣyāḥ partha sarvaśaḥ //*
8. *Ibid.*, IV. 40: *ajñāś caśraddadhanaś ca saṃśayātmā vinaṅyati / nayaṃ loko sti na paro na sukhaṃ saṃśayātmanaḥ //*
9. *Ibid.*, V.7: *yogayukto viśuddhātmā vijitātmā jīvendriyaḥ / sarvabhūtātmabhūtātmā kurvann api na lipyate //*
10. *Ibid.*, V.25: *labhante brahmanirvāṇam ṛṣayaḥ kṣīṇakalmaśaḥ / chinnadvaidhā yatātmanaḥ sarvabhūtaḥite ratāḥ //*, aslo cf. XII.4.
11. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.4.5
12. *Ibdi.*, II 5.19.
13. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI. 8.7
14. *Ibid.*, II. 14.1.
15. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.4.5: *ātmā vā are draṣṭavyaḥ śrotavyaḥ mantavyaḥ nididhyāsitavyaḥ, maitreyi āmano vā are darśanena śravaṇena matyāvijñānenedaṃ sarvaṃ viditam.*
16. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, I.II 4, 6: *atha yadi te karma-vicikitsā vā vṛtta-vicikitsā vā syāt ye tatra brāhmaṇāś sammarśinaḥ yukta āyuktāḥ alūkṣā dharmā kānās syuḥ yathā te tatra varteran tathā tatra vartethāḥ. ...eṣa ādeśaḥ, eṣa upadeśaḥ, eṣa vedopaniṣat, etad anuśāsanam.*
17. *Ibid.*, I.2.1.
18. SR, p. 538.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, V.2.1-3.
21. SR. p.290.

22. *Ibid.*
23. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.5.19.
24. *Ibid.*, I.4.10.
25. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VI.8.7.
26. *Ibid.*, III.14.1.
27. *Brahma-Sūtra-Śaṅkara-bhāṣya*, I.1.1.
28. Karl H. Potter (ed.), *Encycloedia of Indian Philosophies*, Vol. III, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1981, p.37.
29. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II.1.20: *sa yathorṇanābhiś tantunocaret, yathāgneḥ kṣudrā viṣphulingā vyuccaranti, evam evād ātmanah sarve prāṇāḥ, sarve lokāḥ, sarve devāḥ. sarvāṇi bhūtāni vyuccaranti: tasyopaniṣat, satyasya satyam iti prāṇā vai satyam, teṣāṃ eṣa satyam.*
30. *Ibid.*, II.4.10: *sa yathārdra-edhāgner abhyāhitā pṛthag dhūmā viniṣcaranti, evam vā are sya mahato bhūtasya niḥśvasitam, etad yad ṛgvedo yajurvedaḥ sāmavedo tharvāṅgīrasa itihāsaḥ purāṇaṃ vidyā upaniṣadaḥ ślokāḥ sūtrāṇy anuvyākhyānāni vyākhyānāni: asyaivaitāni sarvāṇi niḥśvasitāni. Also cf. Maitra Upaniṣad, VI.32.*
31. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VIII.15.1: *tadd haitad brahmā prajāpataya uvāca, prajāpatir manave, manuḥ prajābhyaḥ. ścārya-kulād vedam adhāya yathā-vidhānam, guroḥ karma (kṛtvā) atīśeṣena abhisamāvṛtya, kutimbe sthitvā, śucau deśe svādhyāyam adhyānāḥ, dhārmikān vidadhat, ātmani sarvendriyāṇi sampratiṣṭhāpya, ahimsan sarva-bhūtāny anyatra tīrthebhyaḥ. sa khalv evam vartayan yavad āyūṣāṃ brahmaa-lokam abhisampadyate, na ca punarāvartate.*
32. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, I.1.1: *brahmā devānāṃ prathamāḥ sambabhūva viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā sa brahma-vidyām sarva-vidyā-pratiṣṭhām atharvāya jyeṣṭhaputrāya prāha.*
33. *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, I.2.24.
34. *Ibid.* I.2.23.
35. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, II.2-5, III.
36. *Ibid.* II.1.1: *sa vā eṣa puruṣo anna-rasa-mayaḥ.*
37. *Ibid.*, II.2.1: *tasmād vā etasmād anna-rasa-mayāt anyo ntara ātmā prāṇamayāḥ tenaiṣa pūrṇaḥ, sa vā eṣa puruṣa-vidha eva.*
38. *Ibid.*, II.3.1: *tasmād vā etasmāt prāṇamayāt, anyo ntara ātmā manomayaḥ. tenaiṣa*

*pūrṇaḥ, sa va eṣa puruṣa-vidha eva.*

39. *Ibid.*, II.4.1: *tasmād vā etasmān mano-mayāt, anyo 'ntara ātara ātmā vijñānamayaḥ, tenaiṣa pūrṇaḥ, sa vā eṣa puruṣa-vidha eva.*
40. *Ibid.*, II.5.1: *tasmād vā etasmād vinñāna-mayāt, ntara ātmā ānandamayaḥ, tenaiṣa pūrṇaḥ, sa vā puruṣa-vidha eva.*
41. M. Hiriyanna, *The Quest After Perfection*, Mysore, Kavyalaya Publishers, 1952. p.1.
42. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, IV.4.22-23: *etam u haivaite na tarata iti, ataḥ pāpam akaravam iti, ataḥ kalyāṇam akaravam iti; ubje u haivaiṣa ete tarati, nainaṃ kṛtākṛte tapataḥ. ...nainaṃ pāpmā tarati, sarvaṃ pāpmṃ tarati, nainaṃ pāpmā tapati, sarvaṃ pāpmānaṃ tapati, vipāpo virajo vicikitso brāhmaṇo bhavati.*
43. Śaṃkara on *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, II. 3.1: *saṃkalpa-vikalpātmakam antaḥkaraṇaṃ tanmayo manomayaḥ.*
44. M. Hiriyanna, op. cit., p.2
45. *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* II.31: *tasya yajur eva śiraḥ, ṛg dakṣiṇaḥ pakṣaḥ, sāmottaraḥ pakṣaḥ, ādeśa ātmā, atharvāṅgiraṣaḥ p ucchaṃ pratiṣṭhā*
46. *Ibid.*, II.4.1: *tasya śraddhaiva śiraḥ, ṛtam dakṣiṇaḥ pakṣaḥ, satyam uttaraḥ pakṣaḥ, yaga ātmā, mahāḥ pucchaṃ pratiṣṭhā.*
47. M. Hiriyanna, Op. cit., p.2.
48. *Dīghanikāya*, I.13 (tr. by T. W. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, Pali Text Society, London, reprint, 1973, 298-320).
49. Cf. Subha Sutta, *Majjhimanikāya*, tr. by I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. II, PTS, 1975, 388-98); also cf. Saṇḍaka Sutta, *ibid.*, 192-203.
50. *Dhammapada*, XII.4: *attā hi attano nāho ko hi nāho paro siyā/attanā hi sudantena nāhaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ//*
51. *Ibid.*, XX.1: *tumhehi kiccamaṭappaṃ akkhātāro tathāgatā* (You yourselves should make the effort; the Tathāgata [as teacher] can only show you the right path.)
52. Cf. Alagaddūpama Sutta, *Majjhimanikāya* (tr. by I. B. Horner, op. cit. Vol. I, 167-82).
53. *Square brackets are mine.* Saṅgāra Sutta, *Majjhimanikāya* (tr. I. B. Horner, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 400).
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 360-61.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 363.
56. *Dīghanikāya* (tr. *Dialogues of the Buddha*. Vol. II, op. cit., p. 291-92).
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 293-96
58. Cf. *Anguttaranikāya* I.188ff.
59. Cf. *Majjhimanikāya* (tr. I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. II, op. cit., pp. 414 ff.).
60. *Samyuktanikāya*, II. 17 ff.
61. *Majjhimanikāya* (tr. I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings*, Vol. I, pp. 192-93)