

The Role of Ethics in the Cultivation of Behavioral Restraints

Ven. D. T. Lan

Designation: Reading for Master of Arts Degree in Buddhist Studies
Affiliation: Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA) - Palkelele, Sri Lanka

Abstract:

Ethics in the cultivation of behavior restraints in Buddhism is mainly concerned through three categories body, speech, and mind that representing the domains of physical, verbal, and mental conduct. The causes leading to committing unethical behavior are considered three foundations for motivation greed, anger, and ignorance. One knows the roots of the unwholesome and wholesome behavior will be easy to eradicate unwholesome psychological roots (greed, anger, and ignorance) and cultivate wholesome roots (non-greed, non-anger, and wisdom).

Avoiding behavior that brings suffering to oneself and other-selves is crucial conduct that one needs to be concerned about. A person should be aware of what one should do and should not do. Besides, one should reflect on one's behavior or in other words, one should carefully reflect on actions through one's body, speech, and mind before doing anything.

Practicing the golden rule in Buddhism is able to cultivate ethical behavior by the Buddhist way of ethical life. The negative psychological traits are in need of replacing by ethically behavioral ones, generosity, compassion and wisdom.

Keywords: The Role of Ethics, Behavior, Unwholesome, and Wholesome Conduct, The Golden Rule.

Introduction

It could be seen that there are four pillars of western ethics including descriptive ethics, meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Buddhism focuses on practice and the role of ethics in the cultivation of behavioral restraints. The principles of guidance in Buddhism are not to do any unwholesome actions, to cultivate wholesome actions, and purify one's mind. To cultivate ethical attitudes and restrain unethical behavior, a person should be able to eradicate unwholesome psychological roots that are called greed, hatred, and delusion. They are described as unwholesome roots (*akusalamula*) because they are more likely to urge and motivate a person to commit unethical acts.

Many terms are used to refer to good and bad perspectives, namely, Merit (*puñña*)- demerit

(*pāpa*), wholesome (*kusala*)- unwholesome (*akusala*), moral (*sīla*)- immoral (*dussīla*), etc. Buddhist virtue cultivation and mental development are achieved through three stages of training in the Buddhist path, training in moral conduct (*sīla*), training in concentration (*samādhi*), and training in wisdom (*paññā*).

The importance of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā* is expressed in the following verse:

“A wise monk, established in virtue, developing concentration and wisdom,

Being ardent and prudent, is able to disentangle this tangle”¹

The Roots of Wholesome and Unwholesome Conduct

Greed, anger, and ignorance, are considered to be the roots or the foundation for the motivation to commit unethical behavior. The Buddha also mentions the origin of unwholesome behavior as follows:

“And what, friends, is unwholesome, what is the root of the unwholesome, what is wholesome, what is the root of the wholesome? Killing living beings is unwholesome; taking what is not given is unwholesome; misconduct in sensual pleasures is unwholesome; false speech is unwholesome; malicious speech is unwholesome; harsh speech is unwholesome; gossip is unwholesome; covetousness is unwholesome; 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.”²

The three roots of *akusala* greed, hatred, and delusion, the three unwholesome roots determine actions related to body, speech, and mind. Thus, it is possible to perceive that there are motives called craving, hatred, and delusion leading to unwholesome actions. There are three *akusala* related to body, four *akusala* related to speech and three *akusala* related to mind. Accordingly, there are ten unwholesome forms of behavior. The above distinctions provide a basis for determining what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. When one realizes what ought to be done, and what ought not to be done, there will be a restraint in one’s unethical behavior, leading to inner peace, and balanced life.

Three wholesome bodily actions are given as follows

1. “One abandons and abstains from killing living beings; lays aside rod and weapon; becomes gentle and kind; abides compassionate to all living beings”
2. One abandons and abstains from taking of what is not given; does not take by way of theft the wealth and property of others in the village or forest.”
3. One abandons and abstains from misconduct in sensual pleasures; avoids sex with females protected by a parent or parents, siblings or relatives; married; engaged or legally protected.”

The four wholesome verbal actions are:

1. “One abandons and abstains from false speech; does not lie when questioned as a witness; does not in full awareness speak falsehood for one’s own ends, or for another’s ends, or for the sake of some trifling gain.”
2. “One abandons and abstains from malicious speech; does not repeat elsewhere what one has heard here in order to divide those people from these, nor does one repeat to these people what one has heard elsewhere in order to divide these people from those; unites those who are divided; becomes a promoter of friendships; enjoys concord, rejoices in concord, delights in concord; is a speaker of words that promote concord.”
3. “One abandons and abstains from harsh speech; speaks such words as are gentle, pleasing to the ear, and loveable, going into the heart, are courteous, desired by many, and agreeable to many.”
4. “One abandons and abstains from gossip; speaks at the right time, speaks what is fact, speaks what is beneficial, speaks on the dhamma and the discipline; at the right time one speaks such words as are worth recording, reasonable, moderate and advantageous.”

The three wholesome mental actions are:

1. “One is not covetous; does not covet the wealth and property of others thus: ‘oh may what belongs to another be mine!’”
2. “One’s mind has goodwill; one has intentions free from hate thus: ‘May these beings be free from enmity, affliction, and anxiety! May they live happily!’”
3. “One has right view, undistorted vision, and believes in the efficacy of actions, good and bad actions; good and virtuous people who have themselves realized by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.” (AN. V, PP.266-268).

The Buddha gives advice to his disciples to cultivate the good saying, “cultivate the good, O disciples! One can cultivate the good, disciples. If it were impossible to cultivate the good, I would not ask you to do so. But as it can be done, therefore, I say, ‘cultivate the good!’ if this cultivation of the good would bring harm and suffering, I would not ask you to cultivate it. But as the cultivation of the good brings well-being and happiness, therefore, I say, ‘cultivate the good!’” (AN I, p.59)

When a person can refrain from doing unwholesome deeds, one has benefits that follow. It can be seen in the table below:

Precept	Cultivation in ethical behavior	Ethical Behavior
Abstains from killing beings	Cultivates loving-kindness and compassion Protect the peace	Be respected by others Not obsessed with killing, one’s mind free from regret
Abstains from taking what is	Generosity and renunciation	Right of property

not given		
Abstains from sexual misconduct	fidelity in marriage	Happy in marriage
Abstains from false speech	Manifests truth	Be trusted and respected Be capable of healing by words
Abstains from malicious speech	Performs speech that brings harmony	
Abstains from harsh speech	Performs mild speech	
Abstains from gossip	Performs valuable speech bringing happiness to others	
Abstains from greed	moderation	Has contentment Refrains from unethical behavior
Abstains from hatred	Practices loving-kindness and compassion	Shows virtue of leadership Good behavior control
Abstains from delusion	Possesses wisdom	Attains happiness in this very life. Attains the ultimate goal

The Figure: Ten Wholesome Deeds in the Cultivation of Behavioral Restraints.

The bases of meritorious action are mentioned in Buddhist sources as follows:

“Bhikkhus, there are these three grounds for making merit. What three? The ground for making merit consisting of giving, the ground for making merit consisting of virtue, and the ground for making merit consisting of mind-development. These are the three.

One should train in deeds of merit that yield long-lasting happiness: Generosity, a balanced life, developing a loving mind. By cultivating these three things, deeds yielding happiness, the wise person is reborn in a blissful, and untroubled happy world.”³

Avoiding Behavior that Brings Suffering If a person is not aware of what he should do and should not do, and also not aware of the consequences of what one does, that will bring suffering to oneself and others. One needs to be aware of the way in which one should reflect on one’s behavior.

In the *Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta*, the Buddha taught Rāhulato carefully reflect on actions through one’s body, speech, and mind before doing anything, just as in the case of a mirror its purpose is to reflect. If a person wants to achieve happiness in life, one needs to reflect on one’s behavior and consider whether it brings benefit to oneself and others or not.

“What do you think, Rāhula? What is the purpose of a mirror?”

“It’s for checking your reflection, sir.”

“In the same way, deeds of body, speech, and mind should be done only after repeated checking.”

When you want to act with the body, you should check on that same deed: ‘Does this act with the body that I want to do lead to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both? Is it unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result?’ If, while checking in this way, you know: ‘This act with the body that I want to do leads to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both. It is unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result.’⁴

In an appropriate manner, the Buddha has guided the skill of assessing one’s own actions like the court of conscience, taking it as a mirror to reflect on oneself without deceiving oneself. It can be seen that the morality mentioned here has a close relationship with cause and effect. This means that a person who is honest with oneself will consider what one is doing and consequently get positive results, whereas a person who tries to deceive himself and deceives others will reap blamable results.

“After you have acted with the body, you should check on that same act: ‘Does this act with the body that I have done lead to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both? Is it unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result?’ If, while checking in this way, you know: ‘This act with the body that I have done leads to hurting myself, hurting others, or hurting both, it is unskillful, with suffering as its outcome and result.’ Then, Rāhula, you should confess, reveal, and clarify such a deed to the Teacher or a sensible spiritual companion. And having revealed it you should restrain yourself in the future.”⁵

Rāhulagot the same guidance regarding speech and mind.

Therefore, the above paragraph shows that self-questioning is an extremely important practice, which helps one to be able to reflect. Such questioning of oneself as a subtle manipulation and skill is comparable to that of the treasure guard that does not leave the door for the invaders to steal treasure in the house. Likewise, the person who always engages in self-questioning or reflection before doing something will not allow greed, hatred, and delusion to dominate one’s actions. If a person has committed unethical or immoral actions, it is necessary to confess and correct one’s faults, and undertake not to repeat it in the future.

Therefore, if a person knows how to control one’s behavior through bodily action, speech, and thought, that person is perfectly self-controlled and able to enhance spiritual development.

“The wise are controlled in action, speech, thought. Indeed, they are perfectly self-controlled.”⁶(Dhp, v.234)

It could be seen in some Suttas like Bāhitika Sutta⁷, Ambalaṭṭhikārāhulovāda Sutta⁸, Kālāma Sutta, and Veḷudvāreyya Sutta⁹ that if a person does not pay attention to one’s bodily action, speech and thought it could lead to unwholesome states that bring painful results.

Golden Rule

According to professor D. P. Premasiri, “The seven forms of ethical conduct applicable to a person’s bodily and verbal behavior that has to be cultivated by one who subscribes to the Buddhist way of ethical living are made to rest on the general principle that could be stated as doing unto others as one would want others to do unto oneself.”¹⁰

In the Saṃyuttanikāya the Buddha gives advice to the disciples as follow,

“...Here a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘I like to live. I do not like to die. I desire happiness and dislike unhappiness. Suppose someone should kill me since I like to live and do not like to die, it would not be pleasing and delightful to me. Suppose I too should kill another who likes to live and does not like to die, who desires happiness and does not desire unhappiness it would not be pleasing and delightful to that other as well. What is not pleasant and delightful to me is not pleasant and delightful to the other person either. How could I inflict upon another that which is not pleasant and not delightful to me?’ Having reflected in this manner, he (the noble disciple) himself refrains from killing, and

Conclusion

In Buddhism, it is possible to see a close relationship between morality and psychology, so when one has the experience enabling himself to realize that suffering is derived from greed, hatred, and delusion, it becomes an effective educational process in

encourages others too to refrain from killing, and speaks in praise of refraining from killing. In this manner, his bodily conduct becomes pure in three ways.

Further, a noble disciple reflects thus: ‘Supposing someone should take away from me from thievish intent what was not given, it would not be pleasing and delightful to me. Supposing I too should take away from another from thievish intent what was not given, it would not be pleasing and delightful to the other as well...’¹¹

“...And they have experiential confidence in the Buddha, they have experiential confidence in the teaching, they have experiential confidence in the Saṅgha. And they have the ethical conduct loved by the noble ones ... leading to immersion. When a noble disciple has these seven good qualities and these four desirable states they may, if they wish, declare of themselves: ‘I’ve finished with rebirth in hell, the animal realm, and the ghost realm. I’ve finished with all places of loss, bad places, the underworld. I am a stream-enterer! I’m not liable to be reborn in the underworld, and am bound for awakening.’”¹²

In the Dhammapada it is said:

“All living beings are terrified of punishment (danda); to all, life is dear.

Comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.”¹³ (Dhp, v.130)

If one obeys the above golden rule absolutely and also has faith in the Triple Gem, one is assured of the four desirable states consisting of not falling to hell, the animal realm, and the ghost realm; and all places of loss, bad places, the

underworld. reducing negative psychological traces leading to emotional and behavioral problems. One’s behavior is recognized through physical, verbal, and mental activity, so ethics is not only able to associate with one’s understanding of lifestyle but it plays a very important role in one’s behavioral restraint to be an ethical

man. This leads happiness in one's life in present life itself and next life.

Moral living that helps in shutting off all the channels of ruining one's wealth and

Endnotes

¹“Sīlepattiṭṭhāyanarospaṇṇo, cittapaṇṇaṃ ca bhāvayaṃ

Ātāpinipako bhikkhu, so inamaṃvāṭejaṭam'ti”

Visuddhimagga by Buddhaghosa, Swami DwamiDwarikadas Shastri (ed.), Varanasi; Bauddha Bharati, 1977, p.1

² MN 9 Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta (MN i 46): SA 344/T 99.344 (T ii 094b02); AN 9.13 (AN iv 382).

Katamaṃ panāvuso, akusalaṃ, katamaṃ akusalamūlaṃ, katamaṃ kusalaṃ, katamaṃ kusalamūlaṃ?Pāṇātipāto kho, āvuso, akusalaṃ, adinnādānaṃ akusalaṃ, kāmesumicchācāro akusalaṃ, musāvādo akusalaṃ, piṣuṇā vācā akusalaṃ, pharusā vācā akusalaṃ, samphap palāpo akusalaṃ, abhijjhā akusalaṃ, byāpādo akusalaṃ, micchādiṭṭhi akusalaṃ-idaṃ vuccatāvuso akusalaṃ.

³Puñṇakiriyavatthu Sutta (Iti 51): AN 8.36 (AN iv 241)

<https://suttacentral.net/iti60/en/ireland> on Sat Oct 10 2020 10:41:55 GMT+0530 (India Standard Time).

⁴ MN 61 Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda Sutta (MN i 414).

<https://suttacentral.net/mn61/en/sujato> on Sat Oct 10 2020 13:27:58 GMT+0530 (India Standard Time).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶“Kāyenasamvutādhīrāathovācāyasamvutā,

Manasāsamvutādhīratevesuparisamvutā”

⁷Majjhimanikāya ii, p.114

⁸Majjhima I, pp.415ff

⁹Samyutta, v, p.353ff

¹⁰Premasiri P. D., (2019). Universally Valid Ethical Norms of Buddhism Applicable to Global Education in Ethics. *Buddhist*

property, and making good friendships to have a happy and contented life.

The ultimate goal of ethics and spirituality can be considered to be the attainment of peace, happiness, and liberation (nibbāna).

Approach to Global Education in Ethics. United Nations Day of Vesak 2019. Hong Duc Publishing house, p.12.

¹¹Samyuttanikāya (P.T.S) Vol. V, p.353.

¹²Veludvāreyya Sutta, SN 55.7

¹³“Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa, sabbesamjīvitampiyaṃ Attānamupamaṃkatvā, nahaneyyanaghātaye”