

Critical Evaluation of the Buddhist Methods of Arriving at Valid Ethical Judgements

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Abstract

Ethics or moral philosophy is a branch of philosophy involves in systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct of a person. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, the term 'Ethics' derived from the Greek word 'Ēthikē' which connotes the science or study of human conduct. The main purpose of this ethical philosophy is to provide the criteria or standards to determine the value and disvalue of the human bodily and verbal conducts. For this purpose, different religions and different socio-philosophical thinkers have distinctively presented their opinions to assess the nature and the function of good and bad.

Among those opinions, Buddhist philosophical standpoint on ethical judgement is adequate and satisfactory enough to evaluate the moral questions of human action. In the early canonical scriptures of Buddhism there are some notable references which illustrate the standard moods of Buddhist rational foundation of ethical questions. Most importantly the Kālāmasutta widely exemplifies diverse standards of moral advice which were existed contemporary with the Buddha. In this sutta, while the Buddha is rejecting ten grounds of moral decisions which are considered to be unsatisfactory points in the ethical judgement, signifies the possibility of independent enquiry into moral questions. Another notable explanation on ethical reasoning is found in the *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda-sutta* and the *Bhāhitika-sutta* in which rational evaluations for making a contrast between praiseworthy (*anavajja*) and blameworthy (*sāvajja*) conduct of a person. Prominently, Buddhism not only considers the ethical behaviour of the body and verb of a person, but also the mind of a person can be functioned ethically or unethically. Therefore it is noteworthy to mention that Buddhism gives special attention to the psychological aspect of ethics as well. The Buddha's advice to Ven. Rāhula given in *Ambalaṭṭhikārahulovāda-sutta* shows that just as one corrects errors by looking at a mirror, one should perform an action and should make a moral choice in the body or verbal after having continuously reflected on it. In addition to that, Buddhist ethical system is much richer as it concerns the inner purification of a person who commits wrong. This is an important place in Buddhist ethical explanation that one should admit his own offence and declare it to a person whom he respects and promise himself not to do it again. It is clearly evident by examining aforementioned accounts that the criteria clarified in Early Buddhist scriptures on ethical conduct and evaluating ethical distinctions are foremost ample and sophisticated.

Keywords: Ethics, Early Buddhism, Moral Philosophy, Rational Foundation

Introduction

The word 'ethics', is derived from the Greek word 'ethos' which is used to connote the behaviour and the character of a person in ancient Greek society. The primary function of moral philosophy at the normative level is to examine commonly acceptable standards for the evaluation of human conduct or behaviour. It seeks to attribute positive or negative value of human conduct, judging it to be good or bad.

The terms "right and wrong" or "good and bad" in the English language and their equivalents in other languages often used to refer to human activity, are terms that apply to the evaluation of human actions in an ethical sense. Such terms may be used to refer to other human activities as well although they may not be considered as an ethical use. In ethics, such actions are considered as morally neutral although they may be evaluated from other non-moral points of view. There may be some actions to which both the characteristics of right and wrong could be attributed being actions that could be considered as having mixed characteristics. As K. N. Jayatilleke suggests, human actions can be classified as morally right actions, morally wrong actions, morally neutral actions, and actions having the qualities of both good and bad mixed.¹ The issues expected to be examined in this chapter from the perspective of the teachings of the Pali canon are the nature and the characteristics of the actions that can directly be determined to be right and wrong or good and bad, the basis on which action can be considered to be right or wrong, and the criteria that can reasonably be used to distinguish right actions from wrong actions.

One major area of ethics is known as normative ethical approach in which norms are understood as standards of behavior by which people agree to conduct themselves in any sphere of activity. One can conventionally follow the socio-cultural ethical norms without examining the rational foundation in adopting norms of behavior. In doing so one does not take a philosophical approach. An important area of ethical enquiry from a philosophical standpoint concerns raising

questions about the rational validity of accepted norms. Therefore, when normative ethics turns into this questioning about the established norms in order to find out what form of rational justification is used for accepting those norms, it is called engaging in normative moral philosophy. In normative ethical philosophy, an attempt is made to identify valid rational standards of morality, and to establish general principles by which one can determine the ethical quality of various modes of behavior.

Thus, normative ethics seeks to determine valid general standards for making the distinction between ethical and unethical modes of conduct or behavior. It is proposed that one ought to do what produces the most beneficial consequences to oneself as well as others. According to the suggestion of such normative ethical philosophers, this is the most reasonable ethical standard to be adopted in making ethical judgements.

It is evident fact that in the search for normative ethical principles different standards have been proposed for arriving at decisions relating to ethical actions. In this respect, some philosophers propose that, the best way to behave is, acting in accordance with what most people approve of in a given socio-cultural context. Others might oppose this view pointing out that most people might approve of actions which produce greater harm than benefit and that the approval of such actions is not acceptable.

One very well-known western philosopher who presented a normative standard for ethical behavior was Immanuel Kant. His ethical theory is called Kantian theory of ethics which rests on the basis of the concept of a universal maxim. According to Kant, a maxim is a rule or a principle on which people act. One well-recognized principle of Kantian ethical theory is, "act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." In explaining this fundamental normative principle of ethics, Kant points out that, when one adopts such a maxim one cannot make exceptions under circumstances in which one's situation changes. In other words, when something is approved of as a universal

maxim, one cannot escape it when his or her situation changes. There should be such consistency in adopting an ethical standard.

An alternative standard approves of acting upon what are considered as divine commandments. According to such an approach what is commanded by God to be right, is what is right in human behaviour. If the God has commanded that something is wrong, it is wrong. One might also attempt to maintain that an action is right if it is in one's best interest or it is pleasing to oneself. The last mentioned one may be characterized as an egoistic standard.

Thus, diverse principles for making ethical judgement have emerged in the sphere of normative ethical theory and philosophers have been arguing for and against them in the history of moral philosophy. Most importantly, these different criteria presented for the evaluation of human actions can be recognized as applicable only if a person has moral responsibility and freedom of thinking. If human actions are entirely a response to stimuli, if human actions are determined by only genetic or hereditary factors, and if actions are determined by a person's past psychological factors, then it does not make sense of evaluating the rightness or wrongness of an action. The ethical approach in the teachings of the Buddha takes into account the importance of free-will (*attakāra*), and moral responsibility as a requirement for the ethical evaluation of actions. It is an obvious fact that Buddhism has recognized an entirely autonomous ground for arriving at moral decisions. It is due to this reason that an individual can be said to be responsible for his or her own action. This idea is often emphasized in the Dhammapada,

“By oneself is evil done and by oneself is one sullied. By oneself is evil not done and by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity belong to oneself. One does not purify another”ⁱⁱ

In connection with this activity, it is important to examine here what the Buddhist point of view is in dealing with ethical propositions and what form of criteria are recommended in Buddhism to determine good and bad. It is also necessary to

consider here, whether the Buddhist standpoint on ethical evaluation takes an objective, or a subjective, relativistic, skeptic or a realistic position and if not, whether the Buddhist standards are different from all these modes. One has to carefully examine the early canonical teachings in order to reach a comprehensive understanding on the ethical standards proposed in early Buddhist teachings. Such an examination is likely to lead to the understanding that the Buddha's enquiry into ethical propositions is distinct when compared with the above ethical approaches. Some aspects of similarity with already proposed normative standards may also be seen.

Buddhist Ethical Principles

Buddhism recognizes the ethical significance only of volitionally performed actions. The very first verse in Dhammapada for instance, exemplifies the involvement of mind as the most powerful and the cardinal matter of all kind of activities done by body, speech and mind.ⁱⁱⁱ A similar position is taken in the *Upāli-sutta* in which the Buddha affirms that mental action is the most crucial in the performance of good and evil actions.^{iv} On the other hand, one might not be able to comprehend the exact nature of an action through a mere surface observation of a particular action. There could be a situation in which one might cut another with a knife with a pure mind. But the intention or the volition in such situations is not visible to others. Others may judge that as a bad or evil action just making a surface observation. In this kind of situation, one needs to understand the intention which causes a person to perform that action in order to make a valid judgement. Volition or intention of an action, therefore, makes an important change to the nature of actions.

Buddhism also affirms three kinds of wholesome roots (*kusalamūla*) and three forms of unwholesome roots (*akusalamūla*) on which one has to aware of when performing bodily, verbal, or mental actions. The action caused by three wholesome roots such as, non-greed (*alobha*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*) is considered right or good conduct while the action

rooted in three unwholesome roots; greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) is said to be wrong or bad conduct. It is recommended on another occasion with regard to these wholesome and unwholesome roots that, one has to reflect on the root causes of action, on the action and the consequences of action before performing an action, while performing an action and after performing an action.^v An action is supposed to be done only after knowing the goodness or the badness of the action through repeated reflection.

In addition to that, Buddhism does not reject the inherent nature of humans when considering the ethical norms applicable to them. It is important to note here that the Buddha was well-aware of the common interests of all sentient beings and he uttered that all beings long for happiness (*sukhakāmā*) and are averse to pain (*dukkhapaṭikkulā*). The Buddha also proposed a set of general ethical rules classified under wholesome acts (*kusalakamma*) which are rooted in wholesome roots. Buddhism approves of finding happiness through actions based on wholesome roots but, is not favorable to committing any actions to gain happiness in any conceivable way permitting even action that is rooted in unwholesome traits. Therefore, the awareness of volition or the intention of an action is a requisite factor in dealing with evaluation of human actions. According to the ethical criteria in the teachings of the Buddha, intention or volition is one of the factors in determining the rightness or wrongness of an action. Buddhism also acknowledges that the intention or volition alone is not a valid criterion to appraise the nature of that action. Apart from the intention, the nature of the action, the way it is performed, the consequences of the action, and how it would affect others, must be taken into account.

Another notable criterion on which, some philosophers propose to make ethical evaluations is, the notion of ultimate good. One very well-known notion of ultimate good is “happiness”. If happiness is considered to be the ultimate good, any action that conduces to the maximization of happiness can be considered good. According to the teleological point of view, what is intrinsically bad is

unhappiness and if an action conduces to the production of unhappiness, that action can be considered bad. This ethical standard is identified with the utilitarian ethical approach. The next ethical criterion in Buddhism seems to be somewhat fitting with this utilitarian philosophy. It is obvious that, depending on the extent to which a person’s action is relevant to the pursuit of ultimate good, the goodness or the rightness of an action is to be determined. The ultimate good for every person is the attainment of *nibbāna*, which is considered to be the ultimate bliss (*paramasukha*), moral perfection, supreme enlightenment, ultimate liberation and complete mental well-being. This is not merely a person’s experience but a common goal for all human beings.

The right action or the good action to do, therefore, is the action which is instrumental in bringing about the ultimate good of one and all human beings. For happiness is conceived as the ultimate good, the right or the good action which, ought to be performed, is that which tends to promote the happiness of oneself and others. Nevertheless, happiness alone is not the only characteristic of the moral perfection recommended in the ethical teachings of Buddhism. The *nibbanic* experience and the other characteristics of the ultimate goal are proclaimed by the Buddha on another occasion in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* in the following terms:

“This is peaceful; this is sublime that is, the stilling of all activities, the letting go of all attachments, the ending of craving, fading away, cessation, and extinction.”^{vi}

Moreover, the quality of the happiness which is experienced in the fully liberated state (*nibbāna*), is not a conventional kind of happiness as defined by utilitarian philosophers. Buddhism points out different degrees of happiness which can mainly be divided into two forms. One is sensory (*vedayita*) and the other one is non-sensory (*avedayita*). The second type of happiness is considered to be the highest happiness when compared to the ordinary sensory happiness. The sensory happiness is placed in a lower degree of happiness, for it changes. The latter is attained only after eradicating all the

defilements in the mind and the former is attained without destroying them. As long as defilements including hindrances are not destroyed, whatever happiness attained is subject to change. The happiness attained in the state of moral perfection is considered to be non-sensory (*avedayita*) happiness which is the highest happiness (*paramasukha*). The discussion of this point occurs in the *Anguttara-nikaya*. It shows the uniqueness and the universality of the experience of Buddhist moral perfection. Venerable Sariputta says, as mentioned in one of his teachings: “This *nibbana* is happiness.” And one of the monks who heard this asked: “Friend Sariputta, what is then here the happiness that is not sensed?” Answering this question Sariputta said that: “that very fact of being not-sensed is happiness here.”^{vii}

Some thinkers argue that the Buddhist view of this moral perfection leads to a selfish attitude. But it is clear that one comes to such a view due to a misconception and limited understanding of the altruistic characteristics of the experience of *nibbana*. Buddhism does not support the idea that one who has not achieved one’s own liberation can help another to attain liberation. It is only possible for one who has attained one’s own liberation. In particular, Buddhism does not accept that one can benefit people without self-realization. In *Dhammapada* verses 158 and 159 for instance, this idea occurs as:

“One should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only should one instruct others. Thus, the wise man will not be reproached”^{viii}

“One should do what one teaches others to do; if one would train others, one should be well controlled oneself. Difficult, indeed, is self-control”^{ix}

According to K. N. Jayatilleke’s explanation, it is reasonable to view that the moral perfection recommended in Buddhism is neither ethical egoism nor ethical altruism, but ethical universalism.^x

As a doctrine that values individual abilities, Buddhist teachings recognize the individual’s freedom of thinking and responsibility for one’s

own action. Therefore, it is a fact that the Buddhist ethical teachings approve of the autonomous right of a person to evaluate one’s own action, and for this purpose, Buddhism suggests ethical standards focusing on the process of individual verification. Having depended on this position, another method of determining whether an action is right or wrong is presented in Buddhism taking into consideration the psychological factor called conscience involving the comparison of the feelings of one’s own with those of others (*attūpamā*). On one occasion the Buddha said that “there is no privacy in the world for someone who commits a bad deed. One will know for oneself whether one has done it openly or secretly.”^{xi} This form of ethical criterion is shown in different instances in the Pali Canon and the *Anumāna-sutta* for instance, gives a noteworthy description in this regard.

“That person who is of evil desires and who is in the thrall of evil desires, that person is displeasing and disagreeable to me; and, similarly, if I were of evil desires and in the thrall of evil desires, I would be displeasing and disagreeable to others.’ When a monk, your reverences, knows this, he should make up his mind that: ‘I will not be of evil desires nor in the thrall of evil desires.’”^{xii}

This ethical criterion is similar to the ethical rule known as the Golden Rule principle introduced in western ethics and is highly valued in Buddhism. This criterion is well-exemplified through the explanations given in various places in the canonical discourses. A well-known example is given in this connection in four main verses of *Dhammapada*:

“All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.”^{xiii}

“All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill.”^{xiv}

“One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter.”^{xv}

Buddhism presents this criterion of “compared to oneself” (*attūpamā*) from a very profound and practical sense in order to make universally valid ethical evaluations, and the next instance mentioned in *Potaliya-sutta* would extend the weight of the above criterion further by adding more evaluative methods. The sutta mentions that,

“If I were to kill living beings, I would blame myself for doing so; the wise, having investigated, would censure me for doing so; and on the dissolution of the body, after death, because of killing living beings an unhappy destination would be expected.”^{xvi}

In addition to the individual's conscience (*attā pi mamupavadeyya*), two other standards viz. the disapproval of wise people (*anuviccaviññūgaraheyyum*) and the bad consequences that cause one to be born in state of downfall (*parammarañāduggatipāṭikañkhā*), are taken into consideration as the method of determining good and bad.

Additionally, in determining the worth of human action in terms of consequences, the third point: the bad consequences that cause a person to be born in a state of downfall (*parammarañāduggatipāṭikañkhā*) has a direct connection with the Western consequentialist view point. Buddhism also particularly points out the importance of consequence of action in order for making valid ethical judgements and the doctrines of *kamma* and rebecoming (*punabbhava*) play prominent roles in this connection. The concept of *karma* taught in Buddhism which, is a philosophical extension of volitional action itself, is entirely related to human behavior. And rebecoming (*punabbhava*) is the productive result of *karmic* consequence. Pointing out the relevance of the concepts of *karma* and rebecoming to moral philosophy, Prof. Premasiri writes that there is a great recognition of the concept of *karma* in Buddhism like the recognition given to God in theistic religion, and people are supposed to behave morally due to the belief in rebecoming.

“Like the recognition in theistic religions of a world order created and governed by a supreme God, Buddhism has

the recognition of an order of sentient existence governed by the law of *kamma*. This is a Buddhist affirmation about the nature of reality. We have seen that Buddhism give foremost importance to consequences of behavior in making moral distinctions. Belief in the process of rebecoming (*punabbhava*) is considered in Buddhism to be important to motivate people to behave morally.”^{xvii}

According to the explanation given by Prof. K. N. Jayatilleke, two out of four major factors of ethical significances in Buddhist ethics are connected to the doctrines of *kamma* and the process of rebecoming.

“The ethics of Buddhism would be significant only if certain facts are true, viz. (1) there is freedom or free will in the sense enunciated, (2) there is human survival or the continuity of individuality, (3) this continuity is such that the avoidance of evil and the cultivation of the good along with the purification of mind tends to make our nature better and our condition happier, while the opposite course of action has the reverse effect, and (4) there is a state, when the mind is pure and cleansed of all defilements a state of bliss, perfection, realization and ultimate freedom.”^{xviii}

The notion of *karma* which, determines the destiny of a person, is also a crucial matter which covers the psychological part of ethics. The essence of the Buddha's illustration of the concept of *kamma* is to transmit the idea that one is responsible for one's *karmic* consequences derived from one's own behavior. As we discussed in the previous chapter, Buddhist analysis of the *karmic* process comprehends the psychological involvement of one's behavior rather than the physical involvement. At this point, the elaboration given in the *Kukkuravatika-sutta* shows the weight and the effectiveness of psychological engagement in performing any kind of action.

“Here, Puṇṇa, someone develops the canine practice completely and constantly, he develops the canine habits completely and constantly, he develops the canine mentality

completely and constantly, he develops the canine behaviour completely and constantly. Having developed the canine practice completely and constantly, having developed the canine habits completely and constantly, having developed the canine mentality completely and constantly, having developed the canine behaviour completely and constantly, he, on the breaking up of the body after dying, arises in companionship with dogs.^{ix}

This law of *kamma* in Buddhism is a self-governing and self-verifiable process by which one can design one's own destiny. In other words, a person is responsible for his own destiny. On the other hand, life after death is not something designed by an extra force. It is also a result of generative cause of *karmic* action. Therefore, it is reasonable to affirm that, it is possible to value or

devalue not only in the ethical sphere, but also other spheres in the entire life process on the basis of this *karma* concept in Buddhism.

Conclusion

Through all of the above moral principles, Buddhism seeks to emphasize that human behavior and moral judgments should be made on a rational, psychological, sociological and, humanitarian basis. Buddhism highly values the ethical behavior and ethical judgment established on the basis of rational thinking. It also maintains that it is not proper to attribute ethical praise or blame to a person without proper investigation and valid reasons (*ananuviccaapariyogāhetvā*).^{xx} The point of the above discussion was to show clearly that there are universalistic characteristics in the Buddhist ethical teachings.

Endnotes

ⁱ K. N. Jayatilleke. *Ethics in Buddhist Perspective*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. p. 42.1984.

ⁱⁱ “*Attanāvakaṭampāpaṃ, attanāsaṃkilissati, attanāvaakaṭampāpaṃ, attanāvavisujjhati, suddhāsuddhipaccattaṃ, nāññoaṇṇaṃvisodhaye*” – *Dhammapada* 165.

ⁱⁱⁱ “*Manopubbaṅgamādhammā, manoṣeṭṭhāmanomayā, manasācepasannabhāsativākarotivā, tatonāṃdukkhamanveti, cakkamvavahatopadaṃ.*” – *Dhammapada* 01.

^{iv} “*Imesaṃkhoahaṃ, tapassi, tiṇṇaṃkammānaṃevaṃpaṭivibhattānaṃevaṃpaṭivisiṭṭhānaṃmanokamma ṇmahāsāvajjatarapaṇṇāpemi.*” - *Upāli-sutta* MN i. p. 373.

^v *Ambalaṭṭhikarāhulovāda-sutta*. MN i. p. 414.

^{vi} “*Etasantaṃetaṃpaṇṇāṃ, yadidaṃsabbasaṅkhārasamathosabbūpadhipaṭinissaggaṇṇāḥkhayo virago nirodhonibbāna'nti.*” - *Paṭthamasamādhī-sutta*. AN v. p. 353.

^{vii} “*Sukhamidaṃāvuso, nibbānaṃ. Kīṃpanetthāvusoṣāriputta, sukhaṃyadethanattivedayitanti?*” *Etadevakhvettha, sukhaṃyadethanattivedayitaṃ - Nibbānasukha-sutta*. AN ix. p. 34.

^{viii} “*Attānaṃevaṃpaṭhamam, patirūpenivesaye, athaññaṃanusāseyya, nakilisseyyapaṇḍito.*” – *Dhammapada* 158.

^{ix} “*Attānañcethāḥkayirā, yathaññaṃanusāsati, sudantovatadametha, attā hi kiraduddamo.*” – *Ibid*. 159

^x K. N. Jayatilleke. *Ethics in Buddhist Perspective* (talk given in 1970). Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. p. 6. 1984.

^{xi} “*Natthi loke rahoṇāma, pāpakammaṃpakubbato; Attātepurisajānāti, āvīvāyadivāraho.*” – *Ādhipateyya-sutta*. AN i. p. 149.

^{xii} “*Yokhvāyaṃpuggalopāpiccho, pāpikānaṃicchānaṃvasaṃgato, ayaṃ me puggaloappiyoamanāpo; ahañcevakhopanaṃsāpāpicchopāpikānaṃicchānaṃvasaṃgato, ahampāssaṃparesaṃappiyoamanāpo'ti. Evaṃjānantenāvuso, bhikkhunā 'napāpicchobhavissāmi, napāpikānaṃicchānaṃvasaṃgato'ticittamuppādetabbaṃ.*” – *Anumāna-sutta*. MN i. p. 98.

^{xiii} “Sabbetasantidaṇḍassa, sabbebhāyantimaccuno, attānaṃupamaṃkatvā, nahaneyyanaghāṭaye.” – Dhammapada 129.

^{xiv} “Sabbetasantidaṇḍassa, sabbesaṃjīvitampiyaṃ, attānaṃupamaṃkatvā, nahaneyyanaghāṭaye.” – Ibid. 130.

^{xv} “sukhakāṃnibhūtānī, yodaṇḍena vihiṃsaṃ, attanosukhamesāno, pecca so nalabhatesukhaṃ.” – Ibid. 131.

^{xvi} “Ahañcevakhopanapāṇātipātāssaṃ, attāpimaṃupavadeyyapāṇātipātappaccayā, anuviccāpimaṃviññūgaraheyyupāṇātipātappaccayā, kāyassabhedāparaṃmarañāduggatipāṭikaṅkhāpāṇātipātappaccayā.” – Potaliya-sutta. MN i. p. 363.

^{xvii} Dhirasekera, J. D., Weeraratne, W. G. *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism: (ed) Ethics*. Pemasiri, P. D. Vol v. p. 156. Sri Lanka: Government Publication. 1990.

^{xviii} K. N. Jayatilleke. *Ethics in Buddhist Perspective* (talk given in 1970). Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society. p. 6. 1984.

^{xix} “Idha, puṇṇa, ekaccokukkuravatambhāvetipariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkurasīlambhāvetipariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkurācittambhāvetipariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkurākappambhāvetipariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ. So kukkuravatambhāvetvāpariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkurasīlambhāvetvāpariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkuracittambhāvetvāpariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃ, kukkurākappambhāvetvāpariṇāṃabbokiṇṇaṃkāyassabhedāparaṃmarañākkurāṇaṃsahabyataṃuppajjati.” – Kukuravatika-sutta. MN i. p. 388.

^{xx} *Bāhitika-sutta*. MN ii. p. 114.