

Moral Evaluation in Early Buddhism

The teachings of Buddhism as represented in the Pali Canonical literature are rich in ethical content. Early Buddhism presents a theory about the nature of man and the universe as well as a theory about a goal or end towards which each man ought to progress so as finally to attain it. It has a conception of a summum bonum in human life. Early Buddhism passes moral judgements on men, their character, and conduct, as well as their pursuits in life.

In the philosophical investigations carried out regarding the nature of moral judgements the Western philosophical tradition has produced a number of widely divergent philosophical theories. In early Buddhism in particular, and in the Indian 'philosophical' tradition in general, there is very little philosophical speculation concerning the theoretical problems regarding the nature of moral judgements. In the Western philosophical tradition much ink has been shed on the theoretical discussion of such questions as "Are moral judgements subjective or objective?", "Is 'good' definable in terms of some natural property or is it a non-natural property to be apprehended by intuition?", "What is the logical relationship between statements of fact and statements of value?" etc.

In the early Buddhist teachings there is no special attempt to work out in entirety the formal features of its ethical system. Its views on moral evaluation are not presented anywhere in a logical sequence. They are scattered all over the canonical literature of the Buddhists, and if at all we seek to identify the theoretical and logical features of the Buddhist system of ethics, we have to do a great deal of reconstruction by picking out relevant facts scattered as it were, over its voluminous literature. Nevertheless *it may be said that enquiry into philosophical questions of the sort raised above concerning the teachings of early Buddhism would be illuminating to persons acquainted with modern methods of philosophical analysis and would facilitate the understanding of the system of thought known as early Buddhism.* Hence it is attempted here to see what implications the Buddhist system of ethics might have concerning such theoretical questions.

Few scholars have paid any attention to the relevance of such questions to Buddhism. Mrs. Rhys Davids for instance notes that Buddhism passes judgements of value on the phenomenal states of a human being, and questions what is implied when Buddhism judges that some of these states are good, some bad and others neither. She observes that the *Dhammasaṅgani* which attempts a classification of these states from an ethical point of view does not define any of these concepts. Her opinion is that in the earlier ethics of the Buddhists 'good' meant that which ensures soundness, physical and moral, as well as that which is felicitic.¹ She next raises certain questions which are very familiar to contemporary Western philosophical ethics. "The further question immediately suggests itself, whether Buddhism held that these two attributes were at bottom identical. Are certain 'states'

1. *Dhammasaṅgani, A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics*, Mrs. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, London 1923 p. xc

intrinsically good, i.e. virtuous and right, independently of their results? Or is 'good' in the long run at least, felicitous result, and only on that account so called? Are Buddhists in a word Intuitionists or are they Utilitarians?"² She observes that these are somewhat modern distinctions to seek in an ancient theory of morals. "They do not appear to have troubled Buddhism early or late."³ Nevertheless she goes on to make certain observations on the very same lines that she thought Buddhism ignored, and says: "The Buddhist... was a hedonist, and hence, whether he himself would have admitted it or not, his morality was dependent or, in the phrase of British ethics, utilitarian, and not intuitionist."⁴ Although this conclusion is reached no attempt has been made to discuss adequately the grounds for such a conclusion.

K. N. Jayatilleke seems to have gone much further than Mrs. Rhys Davids. In a brief discussion of the Buddhist 'analysis of ethical propositions' he concludes that "... the Buddhist ethical theory gives a naturalistic analysis of ethical propositions, while asserting that such an analysis does not fully exhaust the meaning of ethical propositions, since they contain emotive prescriptive components as well."⁵ He seems to have reached this conclusion assuming that there actually is a Buddhist analysis of ethical propositions. But it is very doubtful whether there is an analysis in the sense that he speaks of. Although he says that Buddhism asserts that a naturalistic analysis does not fully exhaust the meaning of ethical propositions since they contain emotive prescriptive components as well, one fails to find any such assertion made explicitly or implicitly in Buddhism. Therefore it appears that he is attempting to attribute more than what is in fact found in Buddhism.

A fresh attempt is made in this paper to search for the implications of the early Buddhist ethical system in relation to some of the questions raised in modern ethical writings. In this attempt, it is intended to be faithful to the Pali canonical tradition of Buddhism, without reading too much of what is modern into it.

A striking feature of Buddhist ethics is that the possibility of knowledge in the sphere of morals is admitted. In the *Dīghanikāya* the Buddha appears to be speaking of "(someone) who does not really know (*yathābhūtam*) that 'This is good', 'This is bad', 'This is wrong', 'This is not wrong'".⁶ Again the Buddha characterizes a person who does not possess moral knowledge as one who is ignorant and stupid. In the *Aṅguttaranikāya* the Buddha says: "Herein, monks, a person does not know good conditions from bad... does not know low conditions from lofty... Thus, monks, a person is foolish and mind-tossed".⁷

2. *Ibid.* p. xci

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. K. N. Jayatilleke, *Ethics in Buddhist perspective*, The Wheel Publication No. 175/176 Kandy 1972 p. 71.

6. *Dīghanikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, Pali Text Society (P.T.S.), London, 1947, Vol. II, p. 215, tr. T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, Sacred Books of The Buddhists (SBB) London 1966, Vol. III, p. 248.

7. *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. E. Hardy, PTS, London, 1958, Vol. III, p. 165, tr. E. M. Hare as *The Books of The Gradual Sayings*, PTS., London 1952, Vol. III, p. 125.

On yet another occasion a disciple of the Buddha declares a person to be possessed of right view when he knows both good and bad along with the sources from which they spring. "When, brother, a noble disciple knows what is bad, knows the source of what is bad, knows what is good, knows the source of what is good, to that extent he is of right view and his view is upright."⁸

In the *Aṅguttaranikāya*, in the context of a typically ethical discussion, the Buddha is reported to have spoken of direct personal knowledge of what is good and bad. It is said that once the Buddha visited the village called Kesaputta where the community of people known as Kālāmas lived. They expressed to the Buddha their utter perplexity and confusion about the truth or falsity of the diverse moral doctrines propounded by religious teachers who visited them. The Buddha's advice to them is very significant regarding the early Buddhist view on moral judgements. The Buddha advises the Kālāmas to base their judgements on direct personal knowledge and not on the basis of the authority of scriptures, traditions, or persons, logic or merely on the basis of personal preference. "Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves these things are bad, these things are blame-worthy, these things are censured by the intelligent, these things when performed and undertaken conduce to loss and sorrow, then indeed do ye reject them, Kālāmas."⁹ The suggestion made in these passages is clear, namely that in morality knowledge is possible.

There are also indications to the effect that Buddhism was expressly opposed to scepticism in morals. The Brahmajālasutta of the *Dīghanikāya* mentions schools of moral scepticism which were rejected by the Buddha. The followers of these schools are said to have adopted a sceptical attitude due to their ignorance of what is good and bad in accordance with fact.

To mention just one of these schools as represented in the *Dīghanikāya*: "In the first place, brethren, some recluse or Brahman does not understand the good in its real nature, nor the evil. And he thinks: 'I neither know the good, as it really is, nor the evil. That being so, were I to pronounce this to be good or that to be evil. I might be influenced therein by my feelings or desires, by illwill or resentment. And under these circumstances I might be wrong; and my having been wrong might cause me the pain of remorse; and the sense of remorse might become a hindrance to me. Thus fearing and abhorring the being wrong in an expressed opinion, he will neither declare anything to be good, nor to be bad; but on a question being put to him on this or that, he resorts to eel-wriggling, to equivocation, and says: 'I don't take it thus, I don't take it the other way...'¹⁰

8. *Majjhīmanikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, PTS, London, 1948 Vol. I, p. 47.

I. B. Horner, translates this passage (*Middle Length Sayings*, London, 1954, Vol. I, p. 58) as follows: "When a disciple of the arjans comprehends unskill and unskill's root, and comprehends skill and skill's root, to this extent, your reverences, does a disciple of the arjans come to be of perfect view, one whose view is upright..." To be consistent with the previous translations quoted we have differed from Horner's translation. The translation of *kusala* as "skill" seems inappropriate in the moral context in which it is used.

9. *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. Richard Morris, Revised by A. K. Warder, PTS, London, 1961, Vol. I, p. 189f. See Foot-note 8.

10. *Dīghanikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, PTS, London, 1949, Vol. I, pp. 24 ff. Tr. T. W. Rhys Davids, *SBB*, London, 1956, Vol. II, Part I. 38.

In opposition to the morally sceptical the Buddha is said to have asserted that there are things which could be judged to be good or bad, right or wrong. "There are, monks, things good and things bad, things blameworthy and things not blameworthy, things mean and things exalted..."¹¹

Also in the *Aṅguttaranikāya* it is said: "The Exalted One has thus defined: 'This is good; that is bad'. By thus defining good and bad the Exalted One is a definer. He is no nihilist, not one who defines nothing as certain"¹²

The early Buddhist view expressed in the *Brahmajālasutta*¹³ that scepticism about "good" and "bad" is due to the lack of knowledge of good and bad as they really are, suggests that such moral judgements made by the Buddha were claimed to be based on his knowledge.

More interesting perhaps is the fact that not only did the Buddha lay down what is good and bad but claimed his ethical judgements to be true. Thus the Buddha says: "In this case, wanderers, the brahmin says thus: 'All living things are not to be harmed'. So saying, a brahmin speaks truth, not falsehood"¹⁴ This implies that the Buddha considered the moral judgement "All living things are not to be harmed" a judgement which is true.

From the above quotations it would appear that some of the criteria of an objective theory of ethical judgements are satisfied by early Buddhism, namely (1) that we can know in accordance with fact what is good and bad, (2) that scepticism in ethics is without grounds and is due mainly to lack of knowledge, and (3) that one can make moral judgements which are true and not false. An objective theory of ethics implies that ethical judgements are sometimes true, and can be sometimes known or at least justifiably believed to be true. An objective theory also involves the rejection of scepticism in ethics.¹⁵

At this point it would be pertinent to examine in what sense the words signifying 'knowledge' are used in the Pāli Nikāyas. We have taken the Pali expression '*yadā tumhe.. attanāva jāneyyātha..*' as "When you know for yourselves..." We have also taken the Pali term '*pajānāti*' used in ethical contexts as 'knows'. These are terms used both in ethical and non-ethical contexts. We may ask: "What kind of knowledge is this?" An answer to this could be found only by an examination of the teachings of the Pali Nikāyas which have an epistemological significance. Since this is a question which requires detailed analysis, and is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be sufficient to point out that the Pāli Nikāyas use terms derived from the verbal root *jñā*, meaning 'to know' sometimes with various prefixes and sometimes without, in order to signify a kind of knowing. The use of one or the other of the prefixes indicates a difference in the nature of the knowledge or a difference in the means by which it is obtained. There are instances which clearly show that the Buddha sometimes meant the knowledge obtained by means of the ordinary physical senses when he spoke of knowing. In the

11. *Samyuttanikāya*, ed. M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960, Vol. V., p. 106, tr. F. L. Woodward, as *The Book of The Kindred Sayings*, PTS, London, 1965, Vol. V, p. 89.
12. *Aṅguttaranikāya* ed. E. Hardy, PTS, London, 1958, Vol. V., p. 190, tr. F. L. Woodward as *The Book of The Gradual Sayings*, PTS, London, 1955, Vol. V, p. 131.
13. See note 10.
14. *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. E. Hardy, PTS, London, 1958, Vol. II, p. 176, tr. F. L. Woodward as *The Book of The Gradual Sayings*, P T S. London, 1962, Vol. II, p. 183.
15. A. C. Ewing, *Definition of Good*, London, 1947, pp. 1 ff.

Vimamsakasutta, for instance, the Buddha says: "An inquiring monk . . . should study the Tathāgata in regard to two things: things cognizable through the eye and through the ear. . . While he is studying this he knows thus (*tam evaṃ samannesamāno evaṃ jānāti*): 'Those impure states which are cognizable through the eye and the ear do not exist in a Tathāgata'.¹⁶ There are also instances in which the possibility of knowing by the cultivation of super-normal faculties is admitted. These are usually referred to as *abhiññā*. The Buddha is also said to be basing his doctrines including the ethical ones on what he has realized by means of his own super-knowledge. (*Sāmaṃ yeva dhammaṃ abhiññāya*).¹⁷ Clairvoyance (*dibbacakkhu*), clairaudience (*dibbasota*), telepathy (*cetopariyañāna*) retrocognitive memory of ones previous existences (*pubbenivāsānussatiñāna*) are some of the major categories of knowing admitted in early Buddhism. Anyone who has developed *dibbacakkhu* is said to be able to see how beings die and are reborn and know how they take their birth in accordance with their deeds (*So dibbena cakkhunā passati . . . satte cavamāne uppajjamāne . . . yathā kammūpage satte pajānāti*).¹⁸

It is sufficient to note here, that the Buddha, as represented in the Pāli Nikāyas admitted both the data of the ordinary physical senses as well as the data of the cultivated supernormal faculties as means of knowing, and did not restrict knowledge to the ordinary physical senses alone. All such knowledge was conceived to be objective and not as mere subjective conviction. The question yet remains, as to whether the Buddha spoke of knowledge in a different sense in ethical contexts, and we shall come back to this point later in this paper.

Ethical discussions in early Buddhism imply the rejection of subjectivism in ethics. The subjectivist thesis that in saying that anything is good or right, we are reporting on the feelings which we (or the members of our social group) have towards it¹⁹ seems to be in direct conflict with the Buddhist view of moral judgements. Similarly the assertions of the logical positivists that they are not judgements at all but really commands²⁰ is also far from the Buddhist doctrine. Nor is it in agreement with the view that moral judgements serve to express the feelings of the speaker.²¹ The version of the emotivist theory suggested by Stevenson which equates moral language with 'propaganda'²² also does not fit the Buddhist view. The Buddhist talk about the truth of moral judgements and knowledge of good and bad clearly rules out the prescriptivist thesis put forward by Hare.²³ We are therefore left with 'intuitionism' and some forms of naturalism which might resemble the Buddhist view.

16. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, PTS, London, 1948, Vol. I, p. 318, tr. by I. B. Horner as *The Middle Length Sayings*, PTS, London, 1954 Vol. I. p. 379.

17. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. R. Chalmers, PTS, London, 1951, Vol. II, p. 211.

18. *Dighanikāya*, ed. T. W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, PTS, London, 1949, Vol. I, p. 82.

19. Stephen Toulmin, *Reason in Ethics*, Cambridge, 1960, p. 29.

20. R. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*, 1935, p. 24.

21. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936, p. 143.

22. C. L. Stevenson, "Emotive meaning of Ethical Terms", *Mind*, (*A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*,) London, 1937.

23. R. M. Hare, *Language of Morals*, Oxford 1952.

Turning once again to a consideration of the nature of the supposed knowledge in the sphere of morals spoken of in early Buddhism, we may raise such questions as, "Is it knowledge of some kind of property, the property of goodness or rightness? Is goodness or rightness definable in terms of some natural property, such as the property of 'being pleasant'? Is it the case that moral judgements can be established by empirical evidence in the same way that non-moral judgements of matters of fact are established?" One cannot give a satisfactory answer to these questions without going into numerous details regarding the ethical system of early Buddhism. This becomes all the more difficult because of the fact that there is no concentrated attempt by the early Buddhists to answer such questions, and as already mentioned their remarks pertaining to such questions are merely incidental and not intended to give any philosophical illumination to those specific problems which have troubled contemporary philosophers.

In the Pāli Canon there are three significant instances which may be quoted as containing at least an implicit answer to such questions. They are (1) the Kālāmasutta of the *Āṅguttaranikāya*, (2) the Ambalatthikārāhulovādasutta and (3) the Bāhitikasutta of the *Majjhimanikāya*.

We have already referred to the use of the words "When you know for yourselves these things are bad" found in the Kālāmasutta. If we do not examine further what this knowledge of good and bad implies, we would be inclined to say that Buddhism commits itself to an intuitive theory of moral judgements.²⁴ But this is not evidently the case. The Buddha explains very briefly what moral knowledge means by questioning the Kālāmas:

"Now what think ye Kālāmas? When greed arises within a man, does it arise to his profit or to his loss?"

"To his loss, Sir".

"Now, Kālāmas, does not this man, thus become greedy, being overcome by greed, and losing control of his mind... does he not kill a living creature, take what is not given, go after another's wife, tell lies and lead another into such a state as causes his loss and sorrow for a long time?"

"He does, Sir".

"Well then, Kālāmas, what think ye? Are these things good or bad?"

"Bad, Sir".

"Are they blameworthy, or not?"

"Blameworthy, Sir."

"If performed and undertaken, do they conduce to loss and sorrow or not?"

"They conduce to loss and sorrow, Sir".²⁵

As important as the Kālāmasutta is the Ambalatthikārāhulovādasutta of the *Majjhimanikāya* from the point of view of Buddhist ethics. In this Sutta, Rāhula is advised by the Buddha to act after reflecting on the goodness and

24. For a discussion of the thesis of "ethical intuitionism" see G. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, London, 1967, pp. 4-15.

25. *Āṅguttaranikāya*, ed. R. Morris and revised by A. K. Warder, PTS, London, 1961. Vol. I, pp 189ff. tr. by F. L. Woodward as *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*, PTS, London 1951, Vol. I, pp. 172 ff See note 8.

badness of the action thus: "If you, Rāhula, are desirous of doing a deed . . . you should reflect on that deed . . . thus: 'That deed which I am desirous of doing . . . is a deed of my body that might conduce to the harm of self and that might conduce to the harm of others and that might conduce to the harm of both; this deed of body is bad, its yield is anguish, its result is anguish.' If you, Rāhula, reflecting thus, should find, 'that deed which I am desirous of doing . . . is a deed . . . that would conduce to the harm of self and to the harm of others and to the harm of both; this deed . . . is bad, its yield is anguish, its result is anguish'—a deed like this, Rāhula, is certainly not to be done by you. But if you, Rāhula, while reflecting thus, should find, 'That deed which I am desirous of doing . . . is a deed . . . that would conduce neither to the harm of self nor to the harm of others nor to the harm of both; this deed . . . is good, its yield is happy, its result is happy' . . . a deed of body like this, Rāhula, may be done by you."²⁶

A discussion on ethics which points in the same direction is found in the Bāhitikasutta of the *Majjhimanikāya*. In this Sutta is found a conversation between king Pasenadi of Kosala and Ānanda, a disciple of the Buddha. Here the question is raised as to what kind of behaviour (*katamo . . . samācāro*) is condemned by religious men and by the wise ones (*opārambho samaṇehi brāhmaṇehi viññūhi*). The answer to this question is that it is that kind of behaviour which is bad (*yo samācāro akusalo*). It is further explained that the kind of behaviour which is bad is that which is associated with harm (*yo samācāro savyāpajjho*), that which is associated with harm is that which leads to a painful result (*yo . . . samācāro dukkha-vipāko*). It is finally declared to be that which conduces to harm in respect of both the agent and those other than the agent, i.e. society (*attabyābādāya saṃvattati, parabyābādāya saṃvattati ubhayabyābādāya saṃvattati*)²⁷

The point that is made with much emphasis in the Kālāmasutta and is substantiated by the others referred to, as well, is that moral questions ought to be settled not by intuiting a moral property as such, but by the empirical investigation of other facts which have a relevance to a moral judgement. Greed, for instance is a psychological state, the arising of which would lead to certain observable consequences, both to its possessor as well as others around him. The Buddha maintains that as a matter of observable fact, greed leads to the loss and sorrow for a long time of both the person who possesses it as well as others affected by him. These clearly are the facts to be known, and once these facts are known, simply, because of what "moral" means, there should be no difficulty in determining what is good and bad. In knowing these facts one may make use of all available means of knowledge. The Buddha, as we have already pointed out, is represented in the Pāli Nikāyas, as one who made use of both the ordinary senses as well as the specially cultivated powers of knowing known as *Abhiññā* in making such observations.

26. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, PTS, London, 1948 Vol. I, pp. 415ff, tr. I. B. Horner as *The Middle Length Sayings*, PTS, London, 1957, Vol. II, p. 89.

27. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. R. Chalmers, PTS., London, 1951, Vol. II, p. 112.

From the instances referred to above as well as others scattered throughout the Pāli Nikāyas, one cannot fail to be struck by the importance attached to concepts such as *sukha* (happiness/pleasure/satisfaction), *dukkha* (unhappiness/suffering/pain/unsatisfactoriness), *attha* (profit), *anatta* (loss), *hita* (welfare) and *ahita* (woe) in the sphere of ethics.

A feature of Buddhist ethics that comes to light specially in the Kālāmasutta quoted above, is the tacit acknowledgement of the relation of welfare (*hita*), happiness (*sukha*) and their opposites to questions regarding moral goodness and badness. This seems to have been taken for granted, not only by the Buddha, but also by the Kālāmas whom the Buddha was instructing.

Since Buddhism speaks of moral knowledge as well as the truth of moral judgements, and also maintains that the criterion for judging something to be good or bad is its conducing to *sukha*, *dukkha* etc., it follows that Buddhism uses such words in an 'objective' sense at least in the cases where they are used as criteria for moral evaluation. Since philosophical problems akin to 'those that arise in connexion with the word 'good' are also bound to arise in connexion with words such as *sukha* and *dukkha* it is important to consider the sense in which these words have been used in early Buddhism. A person may say: "I am happy" under circumstances in which another person may not say so. This would make happiness itself a purely subjective phenomenon. But this is not the way Buddhism has conceived of *sukha* and *dukkha* when used as criteria for moral evaluation.

The Buddha is inclined to call many different things *sukha* and *dukkha*, and the same things *sukha* from one point of view, which from another point of view he would call *dukkha*. For instance the Buddha speaks of the five sensual elements; visible forms, sounds, tastes, smells and tactile sensations cognizable by the respective sense organs; desirable, pleasant, delightful, dear, passion-fraught and inciting to lust, and it is said that, that happiness, that pleasure which arises owing to these five sensual elements is called sensual happiness.²⁸ He speaks of *gihīsukha* (happiness of household living) and *pabbajjāsukha* (happiness of recluseship).²⁹ What is meant by *gihīsukha*, for instance, is explained elsewhere in the Pāli Nikāyas by giving some aspects of it such as *atthisukha* (the happiness of having the primary economic requirements for living), *bhogasukha* (the happiness of enjoying one's wealth), *anānasukha* (the happiness of being free from economic debt) and *anavajjasukha* (the happiness of leading a righteous life.)³⁰

The Buddha also speaks of levels of happiness expressing his disagreement with those who claimed that whatever happiness one could have comes within the field of sensual happiness. Thus he speaks of more desirable states of happiness in the higher states of *jhāna* (ecstatic rapture) which result from the elimination of states of mind such as desire for sensuous gratification, illwill, sloth and torpor, flurry and worry, doubt and perplexity (*kāmacchanda*,

28. *Samyuttanikāya* ed. M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960, Vol. IV, p. 225.

29. *Aṅguttaranikāya* ed. R. Morris and revised by A. K. Warder, PTS, London, 1961, Vol. I, p. 80.

30. *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. E. Hardy, PTS, London, 1958, Vol. II, p. 69.

vyāpāda, *thīnamiddha*, *uddhaccakukkucca* and *vicikicchā*). The different levels of meditative rapture attainable by mental culture are described in Buddhism as the abodes of happiness available here and now (*ditthadhammasukhavihārā*).³¹

There is also reference to *kāyikasukha* and *cetasikasukha*.³² What is meant here is the distinction between a pleasurable bodily sensation and the happiness resulting from sound mental health.

In its gradation of happiness, the happiness, of *nibbāna* is considered in early Buddhism to be the highest.³³ There are instances in which what is ordinarily viewed as *sukha* is viewed in Buddhism as *dukkha*.³⁴ According to early Buddhism, in the ultimate analysis all transient and compounded things are *dukkha*, and in this sense even some states that are ordinarily viewed as *sukha* are in reality *dukkha*. Accordingly the Buddhists have *dukkha* as the first noble truth to be understood. That all compounded and transient things are *dukkha* is according to Buddhism a truth to be realized and understood and not merely an attitude to be expressed. The transient pleasures of sensual enjoyment are those that would be commonly looked upon as *sukha*, but the Buddha says that with increasing awareness, one sees its dissatisfying nature. When the Buddha speaks of things that are ordinarily desired by human beings as leading to *dukkha* he says this in a special sense. In this sense he declared that everything that is felt is included under *dukkha*, but with the specific qualification that it is because happiness derived from momentary objects of existence is transient.

Thus Buddhism seems to be distinguishing at least four levels in connexion with *sukha* and *dukkha*. At bottom is that which is from any point of view *dukkha*. The sufferings of ill-health, old age, or bodily injury, boredom and frustration would be clear instances of such *dukkha*. At the second level, Buddhism, in accordance with ordinary speech calls whatever that brings about the satisfaction of desires *sukha*. Thus, being in good health, being in the company of the beloved, being in a position to enjoy the pleasures of sense are clearly counted as instances of *sukha*. Thirdly, Buddhism refers to a more preferable level of *sukha* which is attained in meditative states by getting rid of certain mental traits, such as the five hindrances (*pañcanīvaraṇā*). At the highest level is conceived an intransient happiness which does not depend on the transient and compounded phenomena of the world, which Buddhism terms '*nibbāna*'. The attainment of this is the ultimate goal of the Buddhist. This is also described as the cessation of all *dukkha*, the state in which a person attains perfect mental health. In this state the individual becomes free from the mental traits known as *rāga* (lust) *dosa* (hatred) and *moha* (delusion), which bring about unhappiness.

Buddhism speaks of *sukha* and *dukkha* when used as criteria for moral evaluation, as psychological states the arising of which, due to our common human nature, is related to similar facts of existence. Having a desire ungratified (*yampicchanāna labhati*) is clearly an instance in which anyone

31. *Majjhīmanikāya*, ed. V. Trenckner, PTS, London, 1948, Vol. I, p. 40.

32. *Aṅguttaranikāya*, ed. R. Morris and revised by A. K. Warder, PTS, London, 1961, Vol. I, p. 80.

33. *Therīgāthā*, ed. H. Oldenberg and R. Pischel, PTS, London, 1966, Verse 476.

34. *Saṃyuttanikāya*, ed. M. L. Feer, PTS, London, 1960, Vol. IV, p. 127.

would be unhappy. Similarly, on the other hand *nibbāna* is *sukha* to anyone who attains it due to the very conditions of our being; any one who is capable of eliminating lust (*rāga*) etc., invariably experiences happiness. Therefore according to Buddhism the question as to what leads to happiness and what does not, as well as what is happiness and what is not is a question that can be empirically settled.

Not only did early Buddhism expressly state that the criterion to be used for moral judgements is *sukha* and *dukkha* but also it was quite consistent in the application of this criterion in actual situations where moral judgements were made. It is with reference to one or the other of the levels of *sukha* outlined above that an action is judged to be good, a person is judged to be noble, and praiseworthy.

How exactly the different levels of *sukha* distinguished in Buddhism affected its moral judgements is a question that can be raised with regard to Buddhist ethics. Does Buddhism always make moral judgements from the point of view of the qualitatively highest gradation of *sukha* or in other words from the point of view of *nibbāna*?

It is clear that many moral evaluations have this relation with *nibbāna*, conceived as the highest happiness (*paramasukha*). For instance the path leading to *nibbāna* is termed the noble eightfold path (*ariyaṭṭhaṅgikamagga*); each item of the path is qualified by the adjective 'right' (*sammā*) as right view (*sammā ditṭhi*) right aspiration (*sammāsaṅkappa*), right speech (*sammāvāca*) etc. The truths by the realization of which one attains *nibbāna* are called the noble truths (*ariyasaccāni*); the person who attains the goal is called the highest being (*uttamapuriso*). The life which is devoted to the immediate attainment of *nibbāna* is known as the life of excellent faring (*brahmacariya*).

The life of renunciation of worldly pleasures (*pabbajjā*) is valued in early Buddhism not for its own sake but as a means to an end, and this life is conceived as morally higher than the life of a householder (*gahaṭṭha*). Renunciation is considered as a factor which facilitates an individual's progress towards the highest good. It is therefore said that to those who listened to the Buddha's teaching and were convinced by it the following idea usually occurred: "It is no easy matter for one living in a house to fare the Brahma-faring completely fulfilled, completely pure and polished like a conch-shell".³⁵

The acceptance of a hierarchy of states of happiness (*sukha*) and well-being (*hita*) seems to have involved Buddhist ethics in the acceptance of a hierarchy of moral values as well. Thus Buddhism is in a position to speak of what is good not only from the point of view of the quantity of happiness but also from the point of view of the quality of happiness.

There is no doubt that the summum bonum in early Buddhism is the ideal of Arahatsip, the perfection in which the highest duty of a person is accomplished (*katam karamāyaṃ*). A person who reaches this state has completed his training. The Buddha declares that such a person is endowed with the good (*sampannakusalam*), is of the highest good (*paramakusalam*) and

35. *Majjhimanikāya*, ed. R. Chalmers, PTS, London, 1951, Vol. II, p. 56 tr. I.B. Horner as *Middle Length Sayings*, PTS, London, 1957, Vol. II, p. 252.

has attained the utmost attainment (*uttamapattipattam*).³⁶ It is worth noting here that some scholars have expressed the opinion that the Buddhist arahant reaches a state which is beyond good and bad.³⁷ We contend that this is a mistaken notion based on taking the terms *kusala* and *puñña* as synonyms. It is true that in the *Dhammapada*³⁸ and the *Suttanipāta*³⁹ the arahant is referred to as one who has discarded both *puñña* and *pāpa*. Nevertheless, there is no instance in the Pali Canon where an arahant is said to have discarded both *kusala* and *akusala*. On the contrary the Buddha himself, the foremost of the arahants, is said to have discarded all *akusala* and to have been endowed with *kusala*. Ānanda, for instance, says: "The Tathāgata is one who has discarded all *akusala* conditions and is endowed with *kusala*" (*sabbākusaladhammapahīno kho . . . Tathāgato kusaladhammasamannāgato ti*).⁴⁰

In early Buddhism, moral judgements are made with reference to the life of a householder as well, who enjoys the ordinary pleasures of life (*gihikāmahogī*). Here too the criteria of evaluation are *sukha*, *dukkha*, *hita*, *ahita* etc.

The gradation of moral values adopted in Buddhism corresponds to the gradation of *sukha* and *dukkha* formerly outlined. Thus actions which conduce to *dukkha* absolutely are judged to be absolutely bad. Killing (*pāṇātipāta*) for instance is a morally bad action (*duccarita*) because it has an unhappy result (*dukkhavipāka*). In the *Cūlakammavibhaṅgasutta* is shown how according to the law of *kamma* which is said to have been perceived by the Buddha with his clairvoyant vision (*dibbacakkhu*) the modes of conduct described in Buddhism as *akusala* lead to unhappy consequences.⁴¹ This law, according to the Buddha is verifiable by any person who acquires such supernormal faculties. The consequences enumerated in the sutta, on the basis of the law of *kamma* for each respective bad action, are, obviously those that are counted as *dukkha*.

The belief in survival was coupled with the idea that killing leads to an unhappy consequence, thus making it an empirical matter of fact that it is so. However the Buddha admitted that killing does not always lead to an unhappy consequence in this life itself, as this goes against the facts of empirical observation. Thus in the application of the criterion of *sukha* and *dukkha* for judging the morality of an action Buddhism seeks to apply it over a period which extends beyond one life time of the individual. So in addition to the immediately observable consequences, those that are in conformity with the law of *kamma* are also to be taken into account. Therefore we may incidentally remark that even if a particular system of ethics admitted the relevance of *sukha* and *dukkha* to moral judgements, there would be a disagreement with the Buddhist system based on an epistemological disagreement. Buddhism accepts the validity of the data of paranormal experience and bases both its factual and moral conclusions on them.

While actions which conduce to *dukkha* absolutely, both on the evidence of normal and paranormal experience, are judged to be absolutely bad, there are actions which, though they do not lead to the summum bonum of Buddhism,

36. *Ibid.* p. 25.

37. S. Tachibana *The Ethics of Buddhism*, Oxford, 1926, p. 54.

38. *Dhammapada*, ed. Suriyagoda Sumaṅgala Thera, PTS, London, 1914, verses 39, 267.

39. *Suttanipāta*, ed. D. Anderson and H. Smith, PTS, London, 1965, verse 547.

40. *Majjhimanikāya* ed. R. Chalmers, PTS, London, 1951, Vol. II, p. 116.

41. *Ibid.* Vol. III, pp. 20 2ff.

prevent the occurrence of absolute *dukkha*, and conduce to states of happiness resulting from the gratification of sense desires, or promote contentment, mental equilibrium and sound bodily and mental health. They are commended in Buddhism while recognising that there are other ways of life which are morally more praiseworthy, such as the way of life adopted by the Buddhist monk which is known as *brahmacariya*. Judging from this point of view some of the things recommended for the layman (*gahattha*) are relegated to a qualitatively lower plane of values, and sometimes judged to be positively bad. Thus material wealth and indulgence in sexual or any other kind of sensual pleasures are sometimes judged to be positively bad, while from the layman's point of view the enjoyment of such pleasures if it does not lead to enslavement, to the loss of bodily and mental health and does not disrupt stable social relationships is commended in Buddhism.

The implication of all this is that according to early Buddhism moral judgements need defence, and moral discourse is a species of rational discourse. What we need to bring in defence of moral judgements are facts about the world and ourselves which have a relation to the consequences turning out to be happy (*sukha*) or unhappy (*dukkha*). Thus when Buddhism judges murder to be a bad action it bases this judgement on one or more of a number of factual premises such as:

(1) that it springs from *lobha*, *dosa*, and *moha*, or any one of those mental conditions which impede the agent's progress towards the highest happiness;

(2) that it has harmful *kammic* consequences to the agent in this life itself or in a future life;

(3) that it has harmful consequences to the agent which may not fall under the law of *kamma*, but resulting from the laws of his country etc.;

(4) that it causes pain to a person or persons other than the agent and thus leads to socially harmful consequences. All these matters are, according to Buddhism, to be settled by observation of natural facts and there is no question of intuiting a non-natural property of goodness as the intuitionist philosophers attempted to maintain.

The intuitionist admits the objectivity of moral judgements, having shown them to depend on the apprehension of moral properties by a mysterious faculty called 'intuition'. Emotivism and prescriptivism on the other hand deny the objectivity of moral judgements. All these accounts are governed by the thought that there is no logical connection between statements of fact and statements of value. According to the Buddhist account of moral judgements, it is laid down that some things do and some things do not count in favour of a moral conclusion. A man can no more decide for himself what is evidence for moral rightness and wrongness than he can decide what is evidence for the roundness of something. The Buddhist position appears to be in conformity with the view that "anyone who uses moral terms at all whether to assert or deny a moral proposition must abide by the rules for their use, including the rules about what shall count as evidence for or against the moral judgement concerned."⁴²

42. Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments", *Mind (A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy)*, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 510.

The argument that is mostly adduced against such a position has been that ethical disagreement can persist even when all disagreements regarding the reasons for the ethical conclusion have been resolved. D. H. Monro, for instance, argues: "The general point is that we settle moral questions by appealing implicitly to some general principle, such as that no action is wrong if it does not cause human suffering. If this principle is granted, then it is possible to decide whether, for example, divorce by mutual consent is right or not. The difficulty comes if this implicit assumption is questioned, or when two conflicting principles are both put forward. The central problem of moral philosophers is how it is possible to justify relying on one such principle rather than another. It is this that distinguishes moral questions from questions of fact, where the appeal is ultimately to the evidence of the senses."⁴³

Emotivism and prescriptivism, as well as other subjective theories were offered as solutions to this problem. According to the emotivist account of moral judgements put forward by Stevenson, the process of giving reasons for ethical conclusions is a special process of non-deductive inference, in which statements expressing beliefs form the premises, and emotive utterances, the conclusion. As Mrs. Foot puts it, "Stevenson speaks of 'ethical inference' and of giving reasons, but the process which he describes is rather that of trying to produce a result, an attitude by means of a special kind of adjustment, an alteration in belief."⁴⁴

According to the prescriptivist thesis put forward by Hare, the argument to a moral conclusion is a syllogistic inference with the ordinary rules of inference. But no moral conclusion can be derived from a set of purely descriptive premises; there must be an evaluative major premise in a moral argument. A moral argument, according to Hare, has the following form:

- (a) Action A is killing.
- (b) Killing is wrong.
- (c) Therefore action A is wrong.

The situation about the major premise in this argument is that in the end everyone is forced back to some moral principle which he simply asserts and which someone else may simply deny.

The question is whether human suffering or well-being can be ignored as irrelevant in a moral situation and anything whatever be taken as a moral principle. According to Monro someone may assert a different moral principle such as "No action is wrong if it leads to the promotion of civilization" in opposition to another who asserted that no action is wrong if it does not cause human suffering. But can this be done? Is there no point in asking why promotion of civilization is good? To say that there is no point in asking such a question is to ignore the meaning of the word good in the context of a discussion regarding morals. As Mrs. Foot quite rightly remarks, the position taken by Stevenson, Hare and Monro rests on a doubtful assumption about the concept of morality. "It assumes that even if

43. D. H. Monro, *Empiricism and Ethics*, Cambridge, 1967, p. 8.

44. Philippa Foot, *op. cit.*, p. 510.

there are rules about the grounds on which actions can be called good, right or obligatory, there are no rules about the grounds on which a principle which is to be called a moral principle may be asserted".⁴⁵

Foot's argument against the non-naturalist standpoint in ethics seems convincing, and may be adduced as a strong vindication of the early Buddhist standpoint in ethics. Refuting the non-naturalist, she argues that the idea that one man may say that a thing is good because of some fact about it, and another may refuse to take that fact as any evidence at all, for nothing is laid down in the meaning of 'good' which connects it with one piece of 'evidence' rather than another, would give rise to the consequence that "a moral eccentric could argue to moral conclusions from quite idiosyncratic premisses; he could say for instance, that a man was a good man because he clasped and unclasped his hands, and never turned N.N.E. after turning S.S.W."⁴⁶ She argues that it would be meaningless if it is said that it was someone's duty to do something unless there was an attempt to show why it mattered if this sort of thing was not done. "How exactly the concepts of harm, advantage, benefit, importance etc. are related to the different moral concepts, such as rightness, obligation, goodness, duty and virtue is something that needs the most patient investigation, but that they are so related seems undeniable, and it follows that a man cannot make his own personal decision about the considerations which are to count as evidence in morals."⁴⁷ Warnock expresses a similar opinion thus: "The 'independence' of description and evaluation... does not imply, nor is it the case that, just anything can function as an (intelligible) criterion of evaluation... the relevance of consideration as to the welfare of human beings cannot, in the context of moral debate, be denied. (Again, of course, we do not choose that this should be so; it is so simply because of what 'moral' means)"⁴⁸

In conclusion it may be said that the implication of the moral discussion recorded in the Pali canonical literature is that early Buddhism considered ethically evaluative statements as involving genuine judgements, which can be found to be true or false. In morals there is genuine knowledge to be acquired and this knowledge rests largely on empirical facts. In maintaining this position early Buddhism stands with the position taken by naturalist philosophers. However it needs to be mentioned that in Buddhism it is plainly assumed that concepts of harm, profit, advantage, benefit, suffering, welfare etc. are related to different moral concepts such as rightness, obligation, duty, virtue, goodness etc. I say it is plainly assumed, because this is not established in early Buddhism with anything like the elaborate rational procedure adopted by contemporary philosophers, nor has this been considered to be necessary. It is not by pointing to any 'philosophical arguments' in the modern sense of this expression or an explicit analysis of moral propositions found in early Buddhism that we can come to this

45. *Ibid.* p. 511.

46. Philippa Foot, "Moral Beliefs", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, London, 1959, Vol. 59, pp. 83-104

47. Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments" *Mind (A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy)*, 1958, p. 510

48. G. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, London, 1967. p. 67

conclusion about the basis of moral evaluation in Buddhism, but by paying attention to instances in which moral evaluation was actually done. As far as we are aware early Buddhism does not go into a discussion of other logical or linguistic features of moral judgements.

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