

The Theory and Practice of Buddhist Morality: an analysis of the correct view (*sammā dițțhi*)

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ABSTRACT: After attaining Liberation (Nibbana), the Buddha, Śakyamuni, met with the five ascetics at the Deer Park in Isipatana, where he delivered First his Discourse. dhammakkappavatanasutta (The Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma Sutta). In it, the Buddha presents the summary of his Doctrine (Dhamma), "middle of the which consists way' (*Majjhimāpatipadā*). Located between the extremes of eternalism (Sassatavada) and annihilationism (Uccedavada), described as the Eight-Part Path (atthāngika magga), and presenting the Four Noble Truths (cattari ariya saccani), these topics lay the foundation for Buddhist morality. This eight-part path begins with the "right view" (sammā dițțhi). This article focuses on the Theravada Tradition of Buddhism, bringing canonical elements with excerpts from the Suttas (Discourses) and some comments made by contemporary authors in order to present elements for reflection on this path. The work presents an overview of morality, the "right view", its definition and some of the Suttas where the Buddha explains it, presenting the reasons for the practice of morality, since the precepts are not prescriptive, but rather voluntary.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Theravada, sammā ditthi, right view.

I. INTRODUCTION

Every culture and period in time have a notion of what a moral action is or is not. We must begin by defining what morality is, if we want to understand what Buddhism means by morality. In this regard, philosopher Nicola Abbagnano defined morality as follows:

MORALITY (lat. Moralites; Moralily, fr. Moralite- ai. Moralilát; It' Moralitã). Character of what conforms to moral norms. Kant opposed morality to legality. The latter is the simple agreement or disagreement of an action about the moral law, without considering the mobile of action. Morality, on the other hand, consists of assuming as mobile of action the idea of duty [1].

When we want to reflect on the issue of Buddhist morality, especially regarding its theory and practice, we need to think about what such moral values would be, and how and why they would be applicable.

The first fitting question is: why should someone follow certain moral values? Usually, people follow moral values for the sake of course. It is the negative repercussion of a given act that makes an individual choose to do or stop doing something. This impulse may come as a result of being accepted or not by a certain group. It is, therefore, an issue that suffers variations due to time and place.

We are particularly interested in how Buddhism deals with such issues. However, before we start talking about Buddhism, it is necessary to understand that there is no single unit called Buddhism. It consists of several schools and traditions formed over time. In this regard, we can seek the Theravāda Tradition. Analyzing the moral issue, Jones says:

Theravada Buddhism a moral way of life? Surprisingly, this question is discussed very little. Most writers assume that because this way of life advocates not killing or stealing, it is moral. Thus "sila" is rendered "morality" or "moral practice" and nothing more is said on the matter. The canonical Pali texts do not directly speak to the issue because the question is a Western concern. Therefore, to come to a satisfactory answer, we shall have to search the tradition to find those aspects of it which are relevant to our question. [7]

The question is whether or not Buddhism classified its canonical texts and commentary as containing a way of conducting life with moral values. We can investigate this assertion, given the evidence of a group of texts dedicated to the standardization of conducts, in the case of Vinaya piţaka. They are monotonous precepts that notify and direct the lives of laypeople. Even the canon



that establishes the precepts exhorts the reasons for this, and these reasons range from the nature of personal development to the prosperity of the community.

Professor Dr. Y. Karunadassa, in his opening class for the Master in Arts and Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya, when addressing the issue of morality, presents us with evaluation parameters. Whether or not such values are a Western concern is not called into question.

The theory and the practice of Buddhist morality begins with Right View (samma ditthi). However, Buddhism does not endorse dogmatic attachment to views, even if they are right. To be infatuated with the rightness of our own views is called "sanditthi-raga". Dogmatic adherence to views is called "ditthi-paramasa". The root cause of both is the mistaken belief, "this alone is true, all else is false" (idam eva saccam, mogham annam = idam-saccabhinivesa). Its external manifestations are acts of fanaticism and militant piety, indoctrination and unethical conversion, interreligious and intra-religious wars, and religious fundamentalism. From the Buddhist point of view dogmatic attachment to views and ideologies is exponentially more detrimental and fraught with more danger than our attachment to material things. For Buddhism, a view is only a guide to action. [9]

On this subject, the first point of Buddhist morality is the question of the correct view (sammā ditțhi), which is the first stage of the eightfold path and also the basis of the practice of morality. Thus, without exhausting all of the specifics and consequences of the Noble Way, we intend to explore only this aspect.

II. THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH, THE CORRECT VISION.

The Buddha presented the eightfold path in his First Discourse, the dhammacakkappavattanasutta, usually translated into the Sutta of the Four Noble Truths, or The First Spin of the Dhamma Wheel. In this Discourse, delivered in Isipatana, Varanasi, the Buddha presents the summary of his Doctrine. He first talks about the Middle Way and the parameters that define it, then presents the Eight-Part Way and concludes with the Four Noble Truths [13] [22].

And what is that middle way of practice? It is simply this noble eightfold path, that is right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right immersion. This is that middle way of practice, which gives vision and knowledge and leads to peace, direct knowledge, awakening, and extinguishment. [17]

The Buddha, in this Discourse, claims to have achieved his Liberation by cultivating the middle path, which is located between the extremes of annihilation (sasvatavada) and eternalism (uchedavada). There is a vast literature that discusses the question of the middle path, especially derived from the mistaken interpretation that Buddhism is nihilistic, that is, it preaches a form of annihilation.

The first question that Professor Y. Karunadassa raises is about the use of the term "path" to define the summary of the Doctrine taught:

The use of the term "path" needs to be understood in its proper context. Any other path we can leave behind when we have reached the destination. Not so the noble eightfold path, because the path factors are moral qualities to be cultivated, developed, absorbed and internalized. [12]

Not all eight parts of the path will be addressed, only the correct view (sammā diţthi), since it is the starting point for the cultivation of moral values that culminate in its development.

As previously mentioned, there is no absolute unity among Buddhist schools, so views about a particular matter may vary. In this case, the Madhyamaka school, founded by Nāgārjuna, recognizes the importance of the correct vision in the development of the path; however, it is interpreted as being unreachable:

Buddhist wisdom consists of right thought and right view. Right thought is the behavioral side of wisdom, associated primarily with renunciation, love, and nonviolence. The right view (sammā diţţhi) is, of course, the Buddhist view, the Four Noble Truths. But sammā diţţhi is, in Buddhism, an impossibility, since all views (diţţhi) are ultimately false. [15]

To help us with this understanding, Javanaud explains the impact of this interpretation on the analysis of the correct view:

The text [Vigrahavyāvartanī] makes clear Madhyamaka' s rejection of all views conceived of as definitive. To this extent, whilst previous Buddhist schools emphasized the necessity of right view for liberation, Madhyamaka implies that views are per se problematic. [6]

These two previous quotations were mentioned to illustrate the lack of unity of thought. We will emphasize the understanding of the Theravāda tradition about the correct view and its impact on the practice of morality.



"Right views" (sammādiţthi) are the vision of things as they are in the light of impermanence, selflessness, and the inevitability of suffering. By viewing our experiences in the prescribed manner (persons and things as no more than the arising and falling flux of substanceless elements), we shall overcome the habitual egocentric attitude giving rise to kamma, the volition (cetanā) behind acts done through body, speech, and mind [8]

Impermanence is one of the four seals of the dhamma. This characteristic reinforces the distancing of Buddhism from the extreme of eternalism, since it states that all phenomena are impermanent (sarva sansakara anitia). In this sense, what exists is a flow, which, precisely through its mobility, can be directed to lead the Liberation, nibbāna, instead of following the standard conditioning, which binds one to the sausāra. The point is that, as much as humans can perceive impermanence by simply observing nature - such as the seasons and their impact on plants or the trees, fruiting or losing their leaves; germinating seeds and blossoming flowers ---, when we look at ourselves, we do not recognize the same impermanence, we fight and hold on to a sense of self, solid and unchanging.

Thus we must forsake any metaphysical conceptions, such as the self, and properly ride the horse that pulls the cart, so to speak. Clearly, the right view (sammā-ditthi) expounded by the Buddha is not a mere intellectual alignment, but a truly existential transformation of the primary order, if I may so phrase it [5].

Thus, the correct view is not only an abstract conception, it involves a set of actions for the soteriological objective to be achieved. If we reflect on the triggering of the Eightfold Way, by acquiring the correct view we will have correct thoughts, which, in turn, impacts the language. This results in the action, also aligned with the values and purpose — that is, the correct action. Therefore, that understanding is not limited to the intellect, for it will shape a trigger for progress on the way.

The identity of the middle way and the Eightfold Noble Path is plausible and acceptable in light of the previous passage on the right view, which constitutes the first step of the path. The right view is the initial and primary corrective measure in which it is necessary for the devotee to engage himself so as to proceed with the rest of the steps in the path ending in right concentration (sammā-samadhi) [5]. Ultimately, by understanding what should be done, we can take the right actions. Today, our actions are conditioned by our afflictions, so they result in suffering, leading us to endless repetition.

Recognizing the nature of suffering and its existence, that is, understanding the First Noble Truth, is what determines the entrance into the path. It can be affirmed that one who does not perceive himself dear does not seek his own release. Regularly, the suffering of change is confused with happiness. The action can often be pleasant, but it is a transitory perception, which happens to the dissatisfaction of loss or cessation, and therefore is not genuine happiness.

It appears from the Nikāyas that the Buddha is very particular regarding the custody of sammāditthis (Right Views) to himself and his followers. 'Other' dhammas not emanating from the Buddha are either wholly or partly incorrect they are held as micchāditthis (Wrong Views). Hence the Buddha's doctrines cannot be diluted with other views. False view according to the Buddha is not only incomplete knowledge, but is also inconducive to nibbāna. Thus, wrong views are essentially those which do not point to the 'correct' or sufficiently unerring Path to liberation from the bondages of the samsāra or are uninviting to nibbāna. [16]

Several religions or philosophic traditions seek to determine parameters of conduct so that they direct followers to their soteriological purpose. When we observe our time, we see a variety of interpretations in particular that propose that all of the world's religions lead to the same point, making an amalgam of them, incorporating points that matter, rejecting others, and uniting them without scrutinizing their conceptual bases.

Some even seek to be known as "Buddhism", but move away from the Four Noble Truths and distort the correct view by assigning other values, including abandoning the middle path and seeking eternalism, among others. Thus, Buddhist doctrine exists in itself, the light of comparison with the Vedas is understood, for this was the religion Siddhārtha was taught about in his time as a prince, but which he ultimately abandons after perceiving its points of inconsistency, and dedicates himself to reformulating concepts such as Kamma and the ultimate purpose. Therefore, it is not possible to mix the doctrines.

Sammā ditthi which is translated as Right View occurs at the very beginning of the Noble Eightfold Path, thus, the importance of its cultivation for the realization of the path and its fruits. The various ways in which sammāditthi



could be cultivated have been set out comprehensively by the Arahath Sariputta in the sammā diţthi Sutta. [23]

Given the need to define the limits of our analysis, since this is an essay, we seek to understand which guiding principle would suit us best. Bhikkhuni Vy, in her Master's thesis, points us to Sammā Ditthi Sutta as a guide to the debate. The characters in this Discourse are the Buddha and his prominent disciple Sariputta. The Buddha exhorts:

When, friends, a noble disciple understands the unwholesome and the root of the unwholesome, the wholesome and the root of the wholesome, in that way he is one of right view, whose view is straight, who has unwavering confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma [3].

To understand this passage, we sought a comment about it. At this point, the Bhikkhu Ñanamoli writes a comment to all Sutta. In this case, in the previous paragraph he explains to us:

But here "one of right view" is intended as one possessing supramundane wholesome right view, which is fixed in destiny and emancipating. Hence he said: whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma, and has arrived at this true Dhamma (ujugata'ssa ditthi dhamme aveccappasadena samannagato agato imam saddhammam). Because of its going straight without deviating to either extreme, or because of its going straight by removing all crookedness such as bodily crookedness, etc., supramundane right view is "straight." One possessing that view also perfect confidence, possesses unshakable confidence, in the ninefold supramundane Dhamma. And by becoming disentangled from all the thickets of (wrong) views, by abandoning all the defilements, by departing from the round of rebirths, by bringing the practice to its consummation, he is said to have come by the noble path to this "true Dhamma" proclaimed by the Enlightened One, that is, Nibbana, the plunge into the Deathless [14].

In this regard, the correct vision would lead to the best possible consequence, which would be the complete Liberation, nibbāna. This assurance was given by the Buddha in his statement that he had achieved what he achieved through this path. That's why it's called the real Dhamma. The matter of being pure or unclean must be approached with caution by those familiar with Christianity, since it could once again lead to the eternalist vision, for the pure would be the closest to the divine and the unclean what it takes away. In this case, pure and unclean refer to afflictions and suffering (dukkha), what is virtuous (kuśala) and what is not (akuśala). This, as we will see in the next topic, influences our upcoming rebirths. However, a good rebirth is not the ultimate goal, to penalize a transitional phase, since it is easier to train to achieve minimal conditions. We must not forget that the so-called "higher kingdoms" have also suffered, death is still felt and perceived, and the fear of losing such a good condition can generate an attachment so strong that it conditions the next rebirth to the inferior.

Accordingly, we need to understand the moral teachings in Buddhism, not as injunctions and commandments. Rather, they are guidelines for moral action. They are descriptive, not prescriptive. Their purpose is to show the way, not to coerce. Accordingly, morally good actions are not rewarded. Nor are morally bad actions punished. Rather, they have their consequences according to the principles of moral causation [10].

Why are such indications descriptive and non-prescriptive? Because there is no figure of an external regulatory agent. Despite the Vinaya Code arranging precepts implying sanctions such as the expulsion from the monastic community, the consequences are limited to derived social relations. Rebirth or Liberation depend on one's person. In theistic religions, the figure of the divine determining the future is part of the central axis, and the rules are the parameters of judgment. In the case of Buddhism, the questions are descriptive, because the Buddha explains the consequences of the actions, which are provoked by the individual himself and then exercised by himself.

The Buddha does not judge — he cannot alter the Kamma generated by someone. Traditions recognize that it is possible to transfer merits, and thereby influence future rebirth. However, transience is still present, much less the consequences of actions.

Using an analogy of our time, if we had a nail going through our foot, if we take anesthesia, the pain will cease. We can use the time while the pain is not present to remove the nail and treat the wound, or we can use this time for various other actions. At some point, anesthesia will lose its effect, and we will reap the fruit of choices.

And what, friends, is the unwholesome, what is the root of the unwholesome, what is the wholesome, what is the root of the wholesome? Killing living beings is unwholesome; taking what is not given is 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. [3]

Thus, it is necessary to know the parameters, which we can find by their opposite. That which leads to suffering if practiced will have an opposite effect if avoided. Why are some practices bad for your health? Because they are causes of degeneration, distress, diseases, that is, suffering.

Exhorting the importance of the correct vision on the way of the Vibhaugasutta, the Buddha says:

Mendicants, I will teach and analyze for you the noble eightfold path. Listen and pay close attention, I will speak. (...)

And what is right view? Knowing about suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the practice that leads to the cessation of suffering. This is called right view. [18]

That is, the correct view is the knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. Ending the discussion about the correct view, we return to sammaditthi Sutta, in the selected excerpt of the comment about it made by Bhikkhu Anālayo:

The sammaditthi Sutta describes various ways of gaining such a right view, most are based on insight into many of the links of dependent arising (paticca samuppada). Regarding each of these links, the requirement of the gain of right view is insight into the individual nature of the link in question, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation. In this way, the sammaditthi Sutta applies the basic scheme of the four noble truths to each of the links of dependent arising. [2]

The question that remains is: if the precepts are not prescriptive, why should anyone follow them? The answer lies in the consequences of actions. The effects spread over time. Seeking to answer this question, we move on to the next topic.

III. WHY PRACTICE MORAL ACTIONS

Professor Y. Karunadassa points out three consequences of moral actions:

The moral qualities enshrined in the Path are intended to ensure (a) happiness in this life (dithadhamma-sukha), (b) well-being in the life after (samparaya-sukha), and (c) realization of Nibbana (Nibbana-gamini-patipada). [11]

That is, we reap immediate fruits, such as happiness, in this very life. How could that be possible? We can observe our actions, for example, the action of stealing. When we refrain from stealing, we have a quieter life, firstly because we surround ourselves with people with similar practices, who also do not steal, so we do not fear for our property, then we do not have to worry about social sanctions — since stealing is forbidden in most societies, we do not have to concern ourselves with hiding. This will naturally lead to a quiet life, which results in happiness.

In another Sammāditthisutta (An 4.72), the Buddha explains the respect for the consequences of actions and what is expected to enter the path of correct vision:

Mendicants, when a mendicant has four things their practice is guaranteed, and they have laid the groundwork for ending the defilements. What four? Thoughts of renunciation, good will, and harmlessness; and right view. When a mendicant has these four things their practice is guaranteed, and they have laid the groundwork for ending the defilements [19]

Commenting on these consequences of the correct vision, Frankfurter states the following:

Sammāditthi, right views. These right views concern suffering, the origin of 'suffering, the cessation of suffering. They constitute the four great truths of Buddhism, and are enumerated in the San. S. under the heading of the four flanas, and in the Das. S. under the heading of the four dhammā abhiññeyyā. [4]

The word dhammā abhiññeyyā is the object of discussion regarding its meaning. Wijeratna [24] presents several explanations for the composition of this word, without, however, reaching a conclusive meaning. Frankfurter reminds us of the question of the correct vision leading us to the basis of the Four Noble Truths, and these, in turn, map suffering for us.

The Buddha stated in the Sammādiţthikasutta, about the result of cultivating the correct vision:

Mendicants, I've seen beings who engaged in good conduct of body, speech, and mind, who did not abuse the noble ones, who held right view and acted accordingly. At the breaking up of the body, after death, they were reborn in a good destination, a heaven world. [19]

Corroborating what Professor Y. Karunadassa taught, the Micchāditthisutta is quoted, in which the Buddha explains that the practice of correct vision would have among its results a superior rebirth.

They themselves have right view; they encourage others to have right view; they approve



of right view; and they praise right view. Someone with these four qualities is raised up to heaven [20]

Thus, to ensure happiness in this life, superior rebirth in our next life and the future reaching of the nibbāna, we have to start with the development of the right vision.

IV. CONCLUSION

The first of the eight paths of the Eightfold Way, the correct view, is the basis for the practice of Buddhist morality. It does not itself encompass all morality, but rather is its fundamental pillar, because without this understanding, actions will not be aligned with an objective that results in the cessation of suffering.

Intermediate effects are expected from the cultivation of this path, for the Buddha stated that the one who enters it would have happiness in this present life and a higher rebirth in the next.

Thus, not being prescriptive precepts, they are adopted by Buddhists, who, through their faith in the Buddha, whether it stems from experience in other aspects of the teachings that prove their veracity, or through the renown that the Buddha earned, lead many people to the path of Liberation, the nibbāna.

This essay does not exhaust the subject, but brings forth elements for reflection.

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