

# The study of Bio-ethical Precepts in Buddhism: An Analysis.

**Sailen Kalita**

<sup>1</sup>S.B.M.S. College, Assam, India. kalitasailen72@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

With the emergence of Lord Buddha, Buddhism became one of the greatest religions of the world. The most salient feature of this religion lies, perhaps, in its ethical aspect. Ethics is the key word in Buddhism. Buddha-vacana laid highest priority to ethics. This expression 'ethics' bears manifold connotations in different background. But as far it is concerned with a sense of communication and a habitual mode of thought, ethics forms the epitome of moral principles and moral conduct in Buddhism. As commonly known, the word 'bio' signifies life or matters relating to living things. But it may not be precise to summarize that bio-ethics refers to ethics of life only. Ethics in Buddhism, in particular, has a much wider connotation. Its sole purpose is to do away with Dukkha or suffering. It may be relevant here to add that a number of ethicists harbour abstract ideas of ethics. Buddhism is rather opposed to such abstract ideas and it endeavors to pinpoint the practical use of ethics which is surely a unique contribution to bio-ethics.

Buddhism, a part from gifting mankind with profound Philosophy of life, offers the solution of man's pain and suffering through rigid action which has a permanent value. In Buddhism, priority is assigned to self discipline and this self discipline is to be exercised in both individual and collective form. Buddha desired the principle of socio-ethical perception to be the guiding principle and this is evident right from the beginning of the Sangha. Ethics, being an integral part of Buddhism, Buddha emphasized on both preaching and practice. Bio-ethics represents man's attitude towards living beings of all kinds, though, pre-eminently, it is the human life, which receives the preference. In general term, the paper may be an approach and discussed the bio-ethical precepts in Buddhism and how Nirvana in human life is achievable through assimilation of these precepts accomplishedly.

## Keywords

Lord Buddha, Buddhism, Bio-Ethics, precepts.

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## Introduction

The founder of Buddhism is Gautam Buddha. He was born as a royal prince in 624 BC in a place called Lumbini, which was originally in northern India but is now part of Nepal. "Shakya" is the name of the royal family into which he was born and "Muni" means "Able One". His parents gave him the name Siddhartha and there were many wonderful predictions about his future. In his early years he lived as a prince in his royal palace but when he was 29 years old he retired to the forest where he followed a spiritual life of meditation. After six years he attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, India. His intention in founding Buddhism was to lead living beings to permanent liberation from suffering. He realized temporary liberation from suffering and difficulties is not enough. Motivated by love and compassion his aim was to help living beings find lasting peace or nirvana, which is known as redemption in Buddhism.

The teaching of Buddha essentially develops on a moral code of conduct for human beings. The

most significant character of this religion is in its ethical aspect. Buddha-vacana laid highest priority to ethics. This expression 'ethics' bears manifold connotations in different background. But as far it is concerned with a sense of communication and a habitual mode of thought, ethics forms the epitome of moral principles and moral conduct in Buddhism. As commonly known, the word "Bio" signifies life or matters relating to living things. But it may not be precise to summarize that bio-ethics refers to ethics of life only. Ethics in Buddhism, in particular, has a much wider connotation. Its sole purpose is to do away with Dukkha or suffering. It may be relevant here to add that a number of ethicists harbour abstract ideas of ethics. Buddhism is rather opposed to such abstract ideas and it endeavors to pinpoint the practical use of ethics which is surely a unique contribution to bio-ethics.

As it is commonly known the word 'bio' signifies life or matters relating to living things. To start with, it is felt to be relevant to recall the definition of ethics which may be summed up as the branch of philosophy which is concerned with human

character and conduct. As regards the term Bio-ethics implies ethical problems posed by medical and biological researches.

### Objectives and Methodology:

The main objectives of this paper are to analyze the Bio-ethics in Buddhism as the crucial in present day. Here, I am trying to confine the importance of the study of bio-ethics. The paper is descriptive in nature, presented from the philosophical standpoint of view. The paper is based on secondary data, collected from relevant sources such as articles and periodicals published in reputed journals, books.

### Findings and Discussions:

Buddhism apart from gifting mankind with profound philosophy of life offers the solution of man's pain and suffering through rigid action which has a permanent value. In Buddhism priority is assigned to self discipline and this self discipline is to be exercised in both individual and collective form. Buddha desired the principle of socio-ethical perception to be the guiding principle and this is evident right from the beginning of the *Sangha*. Ethics, being an integral part of Buddhism, Buddha emphasized on the both preaching and practice. Bio-ethics represents man's attitude towards living being of all kinds, though, pre-eminently, it is the human life, which receives the preference.

Again, Buddhism lays much importance to mental purification through observation of the moral precepts. Adherences to moral precepts are conditioned by wisdom by means of concentration of mind. *Nibban* the summum bonum of human life is achievable through assimilation of these precepts, consummately.<sup>1</sup> The object of human life, as propounded by Buddhism, is a blissful state where ordinary sufferings can be rooted out completely.

Ethics or morality is the spirit of Dharma. Ethical deliberation, being the keystone of Buddhism aims at a total destruction of immoral actions, leading to psychical and mental purification. Bio-

ethics is synonyms with man's moral standard to ensure peaceful life for all living beings. Buddha's only motto was to struggle with human suffering, ensure extirpation of the same. He is not merely a theists relying on delivering discourses on morality. He was a realist in the strict sense of the term and was fully aware of man's rational limitations and that is why he did not think it expedient to prescribe strict rules for the laity. In the case monks, who left home, strict rules were, however, prescribed which were not permissive of violation of ethical codes. Thus were the great rules rendered compulsory for monks as quoted in the *Vinay pitaka*.

The Buddhist ethics does not support the notion of happiness of the individual alone. It is valuable here to quote His Holiness Dalai Lama the fourteen who said, "Ethical discipline is indispensable because it is the mean by which we mediate between the competing claims of my right to happiness and all others equal right. Naturally there will be always those who suppose their own happiness to be of such importance that other's pain is of no consequence. But this is short sighted. Buddhist ethics is neither old-fashioned nor outdated as it is open to share universal responsibility to bring forth happiness in spite of drastic change among the habitats of the goal."<sup>2</sup> The central part of teaching of Buddhism have not been redundant by various schools but rather accepted and followed and the fore noble truths, the eight fold path or the middle path are followed in the way they ought to be. Out of four noble truths i.e. suffering (*Dukkha*), cause of suffering(*Dukkha-samudaya*), cessation of suffering(*Dukkha-nirodha*) and the path which lead to cessation of suffering(*Dukkha-nirodha-gamini-patipada*),<sup>3</sup> the last one includes ethics. These four truths form the base for removal of illness faced by mankind. It is held by many that these four noble truths were culled from medical science and that the fourfold stages of illness i.e. diseases, diagnosis, cure and medicine correspond to four noble truths. It really strikes one who thinks over the role of Buddha as a physician who not only gives up hope for abolition from

<sup>1</sup> Bhattacharya, B. (1995) 'Facets of Early Buddhism-A study of fundamental principles', Calcutta, , p.164.

<sup>2</sup> Lama, Dalai the fourteenth, (1990) "His Holiness Ancient wisdom and Modern world", p. 154

<sup>3</sup> Dutta. N. (1971) 'Early monastic Buddhism', Calcutta, P.137

suffering but is determined to find out ways and means to enable suffering humanity to ride over his illness. But it is kept in mind that medical ethics was not interfered with as no medical experiment touching natural system etc. was allowable. Bio-ethics owes to classification from value oriented acts resorted to in bio-logical relevance. In other words, ethical considerations and making use of medical convenience were inseparable, co-related and complementary to each other. It may be reiterated that Buddhism cared for all living beings; the welfare of mankind was uppermost in Buddha's mind. Sacrifices of lives of animals for the sake of treating patient are not to be disapproved vis-à-vis Buddhist ethics. This is possibly due to the thoughts that in order to save precious human life, experiments with the life of smaller creatures are not to be treated as killings. In such cases, the intension is above board and is not equivalent to a terrible crime. Bio-ethics is related to moral issues in the sphere of medical practices and scientific researches on matters connected with diseases and treatment. Medical ethics had its origin in ancient times. Treating patients with utmost care, sympathy and due service formed part of such medical ethics.

With the course of time true medical ethics started to include other matters also as obtaining patients consent in treating him which again includes matters like infusion of blood, elimination of a limb to save patients life. Dangerous surgical treatment which may result even in the death of the patient, loss of an about to be born child to save mother's life etc. to quote a few could be there. In the period of early Buddhism, these developments might not have appeared as urbanization was at its embryonic stage and medical science not reaching the complicated form it now possesses. To Buddha's mind it occurred that man is the best of creation through whom Dharma would achieve. The *Sila* (Good conduct) can be practiced only by man. *Sila* is the very essence of concept of ethics in Buddhism denoting moral practice and good character. This comparing of five precepts namely (i) Refraining from killing, (ii) Taking what is not given to one, (iii) Refraining from adultery, (iv) Refraining from telling lies and (v) Non drinking liquor and other

intoxicants.<sup>4</sup> These five moral precepts may be linked with the widespread vices that plagued the society as urbanization came into existence and which urgently needed some sort of corrective measures to remove them. These precepts contained both ethical and socio-logical value and very much relevant. Buddha found out the cause of suffering. The precept was crucial to find a medicine to social evils die to ignorance. Addiction to liquor, again, which did exists those days spelt disaster to addicted persons and caused immense injure to their health through dysfunction of certain vital human organs. These precepts to the monks imply they must abstain from all acts mental, vocal or physical which are likely to prove injurious to individual self, to others or to both. It is however to be noted that householders laity were exempted from following these precepts strictly. How do these immortal thoughts or action take place? These are the intrinsic physical and mental weakness in man and are dictated by our mind. It is perhaps outmoded to mention that mind is the driving force behind all human activities. To overcome the evil dictates of mind, one has purified his mind. How will he able to attain this purification? Purification of mind is fraught with difficulties. Guiding one's mind leads to a restricted and controlled mind. It urges one of all craving. Training of mind can be done through meditation and that is why meditation occupies a very meaningful position in Buddhism. It enables the mediator to find the truth of life and meditation is habitually associated with following the four noble truths and the noble eight fold path.

Modern means of medical science and technology through doing miracles at times has their own shortfalls and boundaries. The unpleasant effects of some kinds of meditation is being experienced and commented against very often. Meditation is free from such drawback and offers' a sure method of avoiding many mental aberration life theft, making a false statement, addiction to inebriants, indulgence in adultery etc.<sup>5</sup> Such are the virtues of Buddhist meditation. In a healthy society, one has to be assured of the right of living

<sup>4</sup> Dutta.N. Ibid,p.148

<sup>5</sup> Mahathera, R. (1994) 'A Guide to the Mind Purification (VIPASSANA)', International Meditation Centre, Bodhgaya,p.23

peacefully and let other live likewise, killing of man by man is not the sign of good society. Everyone should make aware that taking other's life is symbolic of chaos cause conflict, insecurity and anarchy which can never be the goal of an ideal society. As such Buddhism stood against such inhuman actions.

Similarly, resorting to lies can never be desirable. If truthfulness is absent and falsehood dominates, there will be every possibilities of society being thrown in to disarray and mutual belief and accompanying peacefully co-existence will be difficult position.

### Conclusion:

From the above it is possible to arrive at the conclusion that Buddha, throughout all these invaluable precepts, did a massive help to mankind which benefitted all not only the past but will continue to be beneficial to society in the forthcoming days. Such is the value inherent in the conception of the ideal way of life. In modern era, voice of protest against unkindness to animals is heard very often. The basic concept in Buddhism is non-violence in its entirety. This is the reason of frightening animal sacrifice and cause injury to them is opposed in Buddhism. This incidentally is in agreement with the awareness that we find as regards environmental pollution and maintaining the ecological balance including bio-existence.

Bio-ethics is identical with our moral attitude which makes it mandatory to care for all living being, be it man, animals, insects and even plant world. In the present epoch, industrialization, has also led to problem connected with environments, necessitating manifestation as to how man has to address hazard. Buddha is said to have a positive predilection to nature. The environment with its ramifications is supposed to respond to man's morality.

Bio-ethics at present, possibly does not receive so much interest as it deserves. In order to treasure the dream of a better-off world man has to definitely follow the precepts contained in Buddha's Four noble truths, Eight fold paths and then only a way out of the problems faced now, as

far as bio-ethics is concerned, can duly be addressed.

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