Institute of Buddhist Studies - Graduate Theological Union

Introduction to Buddhist Ethics

(HRCE 3002)

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Class Meetings: Wednesdays 9:40 to 12:30 at JSC Room 130

SYLLABUS:

Course Description: Ethical knowledge and ethical conduct is an essential part of Buddhist teachings. One third of the systematic blueprint of Buddhist practice is dedicated to the development of ethical and moral skills. In Buddhism ethics is not discussed as a part of a religious practice; it is simply a tool for one to live an error free healthy life. A person’s ethical behavior is correlated with his or her level of understanding of how one is related to the external world. Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes a cultivation of ethical conduct that is based on understanding or wisdom. It is the understanding of Causality that governs the human conditions. From a Buddhist point of view, sophistication of a person or a society can be measured by their ethical knowledge and ethical conduct. Basic principles of Buddhist Ethics, application of these principles in real life, and day to day decision-making will be discuss throughout the course using actual contemporary case studies.

Course Format and Requirement: Generally, one half of the class will be lecture and the other half will be class discussion. Class participation of all students is a requisite. Each week one student will be responsible for leading the class discussion after a brief presentation on a selected subject. Students are expected to produce actual difficult cases to be discussed in the class as time permits. All participants should collect a glossary of Buddhist (Pali/Sanskrit) technical terms with possible English translations. A research paper of 12-15 pages before or during the final week is expected.

Required Reading:

Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics
Kalupahana, Ethics in Early Buddhism
Damien Keown, Nature of Buddhist Ethics
Dhammapada, English Translation

Supplementary Reading:

Dharmasiri, Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics
Harvey Aronson, Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism
Proposed Topics:

- **Introduction**

- **Sources of Knowledge**
  Buddhist rejection of common sources of knowledge, report, tradition, hearsay, authoritative religious texts, mere logic or inference, considering appearance, speculative opinion, seeming possibilities, words of a religious leader - reliability of direct knowledge – limitations of sensory knowledge – extra sensory knowledge – direct insight (panna), assessment of external and internal process of gaining knowledge

- **Motivation for Ethical behavior**

- **Criteria of ethical and unethical action**
  Volitional action, three roots of evil action - skilful action and unskillful action (Kusala, Akusala) - Rahulovada Sutta – beneficial and harmful action – to oneself, others and both - transformation of criteria at different stages of growth

- **Reward, punishment and free will**
  Theory of Karma – formation of good and bad habits – cause and effect – perceiving a customized world - pain and pleasure – creating one’s own hell or heaven – one’s own judgment – free will and its limitation – practice of Mindfulness - intentional expansion of personal free will

- **Duty and responsibility, Personal and Social Relationship**
  Causal connection – caring and negligence – self-centeredness – caring and negligence – you are bound – your role in society – social responsibility - duties of an average person – six directions - causes of joy (mangala) – causes of downfall – spiritual person in a society – simile of a bee -
• **Ethical use of Language**
  Types of statements – True, beneficial and pleasant statements – False, harmful and unpleasant statements – various combinations and two of the better choices – right time - Telling lies – backbiting and slander – harsh words – idle gossip – false but ethical statements – Buddhist concept of *Upaya*

• **Ethical and unethical emotions behind actions**
  Concept of good and evil ones – God and Satan (*brahma and mara*) - Four Godly emotions and Satanic emotions – *metta, karuna, mudita and upaekha* - absences of fear and ethical behavior – fear and immoral behavior – cultivation of ethical emotions

• **Methods of Cultivating ethical conduct**
  Development of good habits – conditioning oneself to behave ethically (*silamaya*) – repetitive practice of precepts – basic precepts and wholesome society - following precepts and feeling of security – higher precepts of monks and nuns – goal of higher precepts – precepts as foundation of higher ethical goals – being an ethical person (*silava*) – cultivation of ten skillful actions (*dasa kusala kamma*)

• **Ideal Society**
  Formation of Buddhist monastic order – commitment to practice of ethical behavior — higher precepts of monks and nuns – absence of ownership – community property – simplicity - practice of concentration and insight – learning, practicing and sharing knowledge with others – setting examples

• **Bodhisattva Ideal, Skillful ethical being**
  Undertaking the practice of selflessness – Total commitment to serve others – limitations of service – three goals and three levels of skills – Ten/six *Paramitas* – achievement of ethical perfection – *Sravaka Buddha, Pacceka Buddha and Samyak Sambuddha* – ultimate help – giving knowledge

• **Political & Economic Ethics**
  Importance of economic stability – interdependence of economy and morality – proper distribution of wealth – ten virtues of an ethical government – overcoming of personal and social greed, hatred and ignorance – four qualities of a leader who make better decisions – need for protection of environment and natural resources

• **Ultimate goal of Ethical conduct**
  Attainment of Nirvana – living life without making mistakes – definition of a “mistake” – highest knowledge and skills possible – elimination of all roots of evil – ultimate ethical being – naturally ethical (*Silava*) – perfect human being

• **Discussion of contemporary ethical problems**
Minimum Required Readings:

Following suggestions are only the minimum required reading for the class. However, based on the reading students are expected to do more research and share the findings on the topic with the class.

- **Introduction**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 1; Damien Keown: Chapter 1; What the Buddha Taught (Rahula)

- **Sources of Knowledge**  
  Dharmasiri: Chapter 1; Other suggested readings; Students research on the topic

- **Motivation for Ethical behavior**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 2; Dharmasiri: Chapters 2 & 4

- **Criteria of ethical and unethical action**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 3; Dharmasiri: Chapter 3; Dhammapada, Chapters 1-3

- **Reward, punishment and free will**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 4; Damien Keown: Chapter 5; Dhammapada, Chapters, 4-7  
  Dharmasiri: Chapter 4 & 11

- **Duty and responsibility, Personal and Social Relationship**  
  Singalovada Sutta (hand out); Damien Keown: Chapter 2; Dhammapada, Chapters 8-11

- **Ethical use of Language**  
  Damion Keown: Chapter 3; Dhammapada, Chapters, 12-15

- **Ethical and unethical emotions behind actions**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter: 6  Dharmasiri: Chapter 5; Dhammapada, Chapters, 16-19

- **Methods of Cultivating ethical conduct**  
  Damien Keown: Chapter 4; Dhammapada, Chapters 20 - 23

- **Ideal Society**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapters 7 & 8; Dharmasiri: Chapters 6, 7, & 9  
  Dhammapada, Chapters 23 -26
• **Bodhisattva Ideal, Skilful ethical being**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 3; Damien Keown: Chapter 6; Dharmasiri Chap.10

• **Political & Economic Ethics**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapter 5; Dharmasiri: Chapter 8

• **Ultimate goal of Ethical conduct**  
  Damien Keown: chapter 5; Dharmasiri: Chapter 12

• **Discussion of contemporary ethical problems**  
  Peter Harvey: Chapters 9 & 10  