

Institute of Buddhist Studies - Graduate Theological Union

Buddhist Ethics (HRCE 3002)

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Class Meetings: Thursday, 9:40am to 12:30pm at JSC Room 131

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 condition. From a Buddhist point of view, sophistication of a person or a society can be measured by their ethical knowledge and ethical conduct. Basic principle of Buddhist Ethics, application of these principles in real life, and day to day decision-making will be discussed 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
Damien Keown, Nature of Buddhist Ethics
Bhikkhu Bodhi, The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony
Dharmasiri, Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics
Dhammapada, English Translation

Supplementary Reading:

Keown, D. (ed) 2000. Contemporary Buddhist Ethics
Damien Keown, Buddhism & Bioethics
Harvey Aronson, Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism
Rahula, What the Buddha Taught
Bibliography: Check on the web Bibliography by Peter Harvey

Proposed Topics:

- **Introduction**

General introduction to Buddhist principles – personal and social suffering – Four foundation of structure of Buddhism – possibility of reduction and full elimination of suffering – Eight Fold healing program – place of ethics in the structure of Buddhism - Definite goal and definite method of reaching it – Three areas of refinement – *Sila* – *Samadhi* – *Panna* – theory of causality – nothing is random

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 1; Damien Keown: Chapter 1; Rahula: What the Buddha Taught (Skip Pali Terms)

- **Sources of Knowledge**

Ethical knowledge and information available to us - Buddhist concern 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/spiritual leader – limitations of sensory knowledge – extra sensory knowledge - reliability of direct knowledge – direct insight (*panna*) - assessment of external and internal process of gaining knowledge

Minimum Readings: Dharmasiri: Chapter 1; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 1-23

- **Motivation for Ethical behavior**

Pleasure principle – fear of pain - self-interest – utilitarianism - altruistic behavior and achievement selflessness – protecting others to protecting oneself - interdependence of action and reaction - in this life – life beyond – beyond life (*nirvana*) - pragmatic and verifiable – transformation of motive to help others

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 2; Dharmasiri: Chapters 2 & 4; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 93-102

- **Criteria of ethical and unethical action**

Measuring the quality of action - skilful action and unskillful action (*Kusala, Akusala*) - *Rahulovada Sutta* – actions beneficial and harmful – to oneself, to others and both - Volitional and non-volitional action, three roots of ethical and unethical action - transformation of individual criteria at different stages of growth

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 3; Dharmasiri: Chapter 3; Dhammapada, Chapters 1-3

- **Reward, punishment and free will**

Theory of Karma – formation of habits and our memories, good and bad – result of such action - cause and effect – what you see is determined by your back ground- perceiving a customized world - creating one's own hell or heaven - pain and pleasure – judgment is personal – do we have free will - free will and its limitation – will is pre-conditioned - practice of Mindfulness – gaining of personal free will

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 4; Damien Keown: Chapter 5; Dharmasiri: Chapter 4 & 11; Dhammapada, Chapters, 4-7

- **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 – some characteristics of a spiritual person – spiritual and religious - simile of a bee

Minimum Readings: Singalovada Sutta (hand out); Damien Keown: Chapter 2; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 163-176; Dhammapada, Chapters 8-1

- **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*, expedient means

Minimum Readings: Damien Keown: Chapter 3; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 69-81
Dhammapada, Chapters, 12-15

- **Ethical and unethical emotions behind actions**

What drives you for action - Concept of good and evil ones – concept of God and Satan (*brahma and mara*) - Four Godly/divine emotions– *metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha* - absences of fear and ethical behavior – fear and immoral behavior – cultivation of ethical emotions – how can become divine here and now

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter: 6 Dharmasiri: Chapter 5; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 38-67; Dhammapada, Chapters, 16-19

- **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*)

Minimum Readings: Damien Keown: Chapter 4; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 25-44;
Dhammapada, Chapters 20 - 23

- **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

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapters 7 & 8; Dharmasiri: Chapters 6, 7, & 9
Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 103-160; Dhammapada, Chapters 23 -26

- **Bodhisattva Ideal, Skilful 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

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 3; Damien Keown: Chapter 6; Dharmasiri Chap.10; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 29-44

- **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

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapter 5; Dharmasiri: Chapter 8; Bhikkhu Bodhi, Pages 174-191

- **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*) – ethically perfect human being

Minimum Readings: Damien Keown: chapter 5; Dharmasiri: Chapter 12

- **Discussion of Contemporary Ethical Issues**

Discussing modern ethical issues under the light of Buddhist Principles learnt so far: Abortion – contraception – homosexuality – same sex marriage- euthanasia – stem cell research – cloning – suicide – war and peace -*Jihad*, human and animal rights etc.

Minimum Readings: Peter Harvey: Chapters 9 & 10; Damien Keown, Buddhism & Bioethics