

GCSE COURSEWORK- BUDDHISM

The Life of the Buddha

Question 2- Explain how a moral life could be said to be at the heart of Lay Buddhism

Moral life, in many ways, can be said to be at the heart of lay Buddhism. However, the first thing to get clear is the meaning of the term morality.

The word morality, technically means, the distinction between good and evil, right and wrong, in relation to actions, volitions, and character. Essentially, it relates to the nature and application of what is ethical. So by a moral sense, we mean the power, and ability to understand the difference between what is right, and what is wrong.

There are several aspects to a Buddhist's moral life. Karma is the law that every action, word, or thought, has consequences. This law of karma, which is the way in which life works, affects a Buddhist's reaction to his or her surroundings, thereby giving the opportunity to decide by moral means. For example, when a Buddhist does something good for the environment, such as setting up a *clear up* program in parks, this action of his, is 'ethically significant', and thus, this generates good karma, which then consequently, goes towards the next life. So, in this way, moral life can be said to be at the heart of Buddhism, because the law of karma, (one of the most crucial and fundamental aspects of Buddhism) causes one to decide by moral means, and hence develop, spiritually and mentally, so to build a right frame of mind. Hence abiding by the moral life causes one to become a better person, which is the essence of Buddhism.

Another aspect of the moral life however, is meditation. Meditation plays a crucial role in the development of a right state of mind. Through meditation, one can essentially develop a higher level of consciousness, and hence, see aspects of life as they really are. One of the most important states of mind, which is extremely significant in ethical decisions, is Metta. Metta, literally means, loving kindness, and is extremely crucial because it changes the way in which we react to ethical decisions such as abortion. This means, that we decide to radiate loving kindness, and disagree against any killing, so we react by moral means. So, since 'meditation, (a crucial and main feature of Buddhism), aims to develop one spiritually, and mentally, so to decide by moral means'¹, we can say moral life is at the heart of Buddhism. Linking this back to the first aspect of karma, we can say these two, along with many others, branch out of moral life, and thus it is the main essence of Buddhism.

The Buddhist perspective of morality is well illustrated especially in the Sigalovada, Vyagghapajja, Parabhava, Vasala, Mangala, Metta and the Dhammika suttas and of course in the Dhammapada, to mention only a few sources. 'The morality reflected and explained in these is not founded on any divine revelation. It is a rational, practical code based on verifiable facts and individual experience.'² The

¹ S. Clark & M. Thompson: Buddhism: a New Approach London, Hodder and Stoughton 1996, p 45

² D.Subhadra & B. Richardson: Buddhist Ethics and the Moral Life 1990, p36

individual is to practise this teaching in everyday life with effort and diligence and depend on oneself, cultivating self-discipline and self-control, self-reliance and self-purification. There are no dogmas to be believed and followed blindly, without reasoning and putting to the test. Praying to the Buddha or other beings, the performance of superstitious rites and ceremonies, meaningless sacrifices and penance's are not helpful. Morality in Buddhism provides human beings with guidelines of conduct of what it is good to do and what it is not good to do for the sake of oneself and of others. It is looking into the behaviour of the mind- type of morality with an outside glass and a rotten and defiled interior. It guides the layman to achieve and enjoy material progress in harmony with spiritual satisfaction and enlistment. It guides us to calm our senses, avoid conflict between the mind and the heart, enabling us to get on with our work, duties, and responsibilities with peace of mind and joy; therefore, we can overwhelmingly say that there is strong evidence that moral life is indeed at the heart of Buddhism because of these reasons.

Apart from the Dhammapada, meditation, and karma, the last thing I would like to mention is the five precepts.

1. Life and limb are precious to every living being and nobody has the right to destroy the life of another for any reason. Technically, this means, that killing is unjustified.

2. Coming to the second precept - refraining from stealing may range from stealing a minor thing like a sweet or a plastic toy at early stages, leading to greater robberies, thefts, bribes, cheating, frauds, impersonation, swindling and the like at various levels.

3. Refraining from sexual misconduct seems to be a precept of vital importance in modern society all over the world. Violation of this precept causes most disastrous and alarming repercussions on the physical health, the mental health of the individual, disruption of the family unit, shirking of duties and responsibilities to spouse and children and putting their children at risk.

4. The 4th precept 'concerning the spoken word or Right Speech, is Samma vaca.'³ This is a unique gift to mankind of which the most harmless, fruitful use should be made.

5. The 5th Precept about the abstinence from intoxicants in whatever form, liquid or solid, involves several aspects of the Noble Eight Fold path - Right Mindfulness, Understanding, Thought, Livelihood, Action and Effort.

The five precepts essentially undermine the true way to live a Buddhist life. Hence, because the five precepts, like Metta, and Kamma, branch externally out from morality, this does give evidence that moral life is the heart of Buddhism. Moreover, the precepts, form a foundation for the religious development of a Buddhist, and hence are crucially important. In general, all lay people, aim to abide as best as they can, by the precepts, so to develop an understanding of what is around them, and hence decide by moral means. For Buddhists, the five precepts provide the essential guidelines for living an ethical life.

The issue I have chosen to discuss is the issue of life and death (i.e. abortion and euthanasia). The key ethical principles involved in making a decision on abortion or

³ A.Lambert: A Dharmacchhari's Life in Tibet 1982 pp56

euthanasia, is ahimsa, which means non-violence. The principle of ahimsa is based on an understanding of the inter-connectedness of life and involves avoiding deliberate harm, and striving to bring out the greater good. Metta is also a key principle, as we have mentioned, in deciding on such issues. First of all in Theravada's case, we see that abortion and euthanasia are both seen as being very wrong, and we have no right to destroy life. In Pure Land's case, we see that they too believe both to be very wrong, but on the other hand an unfortunate reality of the present world. So, we must try to avoid it as best we can. Zen actually says we must think carefully about both, and in some cases support it. Tibetan has exactly the same view as Theravada. Finally, the more modern Buddhist, adapting to present times, believe that in some medical cases we should support it. However, in general, for Buddhists, life begins at the moment of conception. The foetus is from this point onwards, a sentient being. Therefore, Buddhists will have something very specific to say about the whole ethical area of abortion, and also apply it to euthanasia. However, there comes a time, when the mind will just have to decide which way to take. For example, imagine a situation, where a woman has been raped, and obviously wants an abortion. You are a doctor, which just happens to be a Buddhist. The patient, in tears, comes up to you begging for an abortion, to relieve her of painful memories, and of the crime that was committed against her. At this moment in your life, all the development you have made as a Buddhist comes to a halt. You think, that this perhaps will be the first ethical decision that you have ever made. At this point you realise that you will not accept this abortion request, and you explain this to her. Thus, one realises that the true essence of Buddhism lies in morality, and in fact the whole meaning of Buddhism is to understand the true values of life, and to be aware of our surroundings. Remember, this moral decision that the doctor made, sets of a whole host of branches (metta, merit, kamma, karuna, etc). Thus every moral decision is extremely important to decide the outcome of your future, as with good ethically significant decisions, you gain good merit, and hence will progress towards **enlightenment**.

So, as a finalisation, first and foremost, morality is about the natural law of cause and effect. There is no commandment, coercion, persecution or fanaticism or demand for a blind faith. Loving kindness (metta), Compassion (karuna), Non-violence (ahimsa) and Patience (khanti) nurture morality. 'Reciprocal relationships as between husband and wife, parents and children, between siblings, friends, relatives, teachers and pupils, employers and employees, the clergy and laity are emphasised.'⁴ What has been considered good in teaching is not twisted and made flexible to accommodate this evil. For example killing is an akusala kamma, even if it is in the name of religion and country. No one will be pardoned and absolved by one's evil actions however much one may pray. Some religions think so. Good actions will bring good results and bad actions bad results, 'whether the doer be king or pauper'⁵, according to the Buddha's teaching. Teaching of morality by setting a practical example is judged as superior to prescriptive teaching. The Buddha himself was the best example. It is a practical morality, which helps the individual to behave harmoniously and righteously with others far and near.

The individual is made to feel responsible and dignified by his or her own actions. Buddhist morality forms the standards and principles of good behaviour manifested in verbal and physical actions according to the path of righteousness and self-discipline,

⁴ D.Subhadra & B. Richardson: Buddhist Ethics and the Moral Life 1990, p38

⁵ D.Subhadra & B.Richardson: Buddhist Ethics and the Moral Life 1990, p39

developing from within and not through fear of punishment. It guides one to be good and to keep away from evil. It involves performance of certain deeds and the avoidance of others.

Buddhist morality goes hand in hand with wisdom and concentration - **sila, samadhi, and panna**. Here, wisdom is not the same as being knowledgeable only. Gaining knowledge only, without wisdom, could turn out to be a dangerous asset.

Leading a positive and wholesome life on earth following the guidelines in Buddhism, creating true happiness, peace and contentment to oneself and others is certainly worthier than a life of trying to satisfy one's ego and greed. It also automatically builds up an insurance policy for the future after death. 'If you can honestly and sincerely say to one another, you are a blessing to us, we are practitioners of the Buddhist perspective of morality and are also treading on the Noble Eight Fold Path.'⁶ Therefore a time-tested, rational, reasonable, logical, practicable moral code is essential for everyone, just as we need the knowledge and application of the highway code for all road-users and motorists in particular. The Buddha's teachings have given Buddhists such a code, but if only one cares to recognise and abide by it.

⁶ A.Lambert: A Dharmacchari's Life in Tibet 1982 pp72