

# UNIVERSAL ASSUMPTION FOR GOOD AND BAD: BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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## ABSTRACT

*History of religion and philosophy is full of attempts to answer the questions of what is good and what is bad and it continuously runs until today. This research paper, consolidate on early Buddhist discourses, will strive to identify common characteristics on the matter of good and bad. Since this investigation is most prominent in ethics, attention should be also paid to the Buddhist viewpoint and its universal applicability. There are four prominent attempts in the field of ethics that can be observed to answer this question. They are: 1) There is no morally right or wrong viewpoint and it can be identified as nihilism, skepticism or subjectivism; 2) There is no universal moral truth and it is known as ethical relativism; 3) Since people are biologically same there are biologically same ethics and it is named soft universalism; and, 4) There is one universal moral code and it is being called hard universalism or absolutism. Focalization on early Buddhism there are basically three ways: result evaluation; psychological investigation; and, law in the society to make a decision whether it is good or bad. While the East Asians utilize chopsticks for food South Asians, particularly Sri Lankans, utilize their hands. There are no arguments regarding those because of minor matter that are not harmful to the society because they depend on environment and culture but major ethics are beyond those. However killing living beings is major ethics which cannot be understood as cultural diversities because it is harmful to doers, others and both. Psychologically, action rooted with*

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*wholesome thoughts is good and action rooted in unwholesome thoughts is bad. Buddhism refuses ten ways of mere acceptance which come by reports, legends, traditions, scripture, logical conjecture, inference, analogies etc. The action is unskillful, blameworthy, criticized by the wise and leads to harm and to suffering person should abandon them. Since ethical values of our deeds associate on the Buddhist concept on merit and demerit, wholesome and unwholesome research will pay attention to those concepts as well.*

## INTRODUCTION

History of religion and philosophy is full of attempts to respond to the questions of what is good and what is bad and it continuously runs until today. This research paper, consolidate on early Buddhist discourses, will strive to identify common characteristics on deciding the matter of good and bad. Descriptive ethics, meta-ethics, normative (prescriptive) ethics and applied ethics are four pillars of western ethics. Consideration of what is goodness is the central subject of meta-ethics. While the East Asians utilize chopsticks for food South Asians, particularly Sri Lankans, utilize their fingers. There are no arguments regarding those because of minor matter and nor harmful to society. Above customs be determined by on environment and culture but major ethics are beyond them. However, killing living beings is major ethics which cannot be understood as cultural diversities because it is harmful to doers, others and both. Psychologically, action rooted with wholesome thoughts is good and action rooted in unwholesome thoughts is bad. Buddhism refuses mere acceptance which comes by reports, legends, traditions, scripture, logical conjecture, inference, analogies etc. The action is unskillful, blameworthy, criticized by the wise and leads to harm and to suffering person should abandon them. There are four prominent efforts in the field of ethics are emerged to answer these questions. They are: i) There is no morally right or wrong viewpoint and it can be identified as nihilism, skepticism or subjectivism; ii) There is no universal moral truth and it is known as ethical relativism; iii) Since people are biologically same there are biologically same ethics and it is named soft universalism; and, iv) There is one universal moral code and it is called hard universalism or absolutism. Focalization on early Buddhism there are ba-

sically three ways: psychological investigation; result evaluation; and, fact and value component wish to discuss in this paper. Very first, understanding religious notion on good and bad is useful for our discussion.

## THE RELIGIOUS NOTION ON GOOD AND BAD

What is good and what is bad were a prominent dialogue through the history of religions and philosophy like what is right and what is false. In the theology, divine command theory and natural law theory are two major streams responding on the subject. The first, divine command theory expresses morality is what the god-like or approve and immorality is what the god dislike or disapprove. This moral truth based on scripture, faith, religious authority, and religious tradition. The second, natural law theory expresses that moral truths are the part of the natural order and are accessible by humans through the successful use of reason with the belief of the God created the world. Buddhism, as an atheistic religion, states good and bad do not depend on god's like or dislike and mere natural order of the world. Among five major world religions; Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism first two represent atheism and remaining three are theism. The notion of good and bad depicted in Buddhist discourses is apparently different from theistic religions and also it occasionally differs from Jainism too.

## BUDDHIST STANDPOINT

Buddhism as a religion and a philosophy provides a remarkable contribution to understanding what is good and what is bad. Ethical behaviors are foremost factors of the path of purification in Buddhism. Merit (*puñña*), demerit (*pāpa*) and wholesome (*kusala*), unwholesome (*akusala*), moral (*sīla*) and non-moral (*dussīla*) etc. are similar terms, in general, for good and bad respectively. Commonly, at least while *puñña* and *pāpa* seem to have represented the samsaric dimension *kusala* and *akusala* may have represented the nirvanic dimension. In brief, the Buddha's principle guidance is not to do any unwholesome actions, to cultivate wholesome, to purify own mind (Narada 1993, 165). Though there is sufficient relationship of good and bad with truth and fault Buddhist attention is focused to reveal what is good and bad rather than truth and fault.

Prince Siddhattha renounced and spent six years practicing self-mortification, one popular stream for liberation, for searching what is beneficial (*kiṃ kusala-gavesi*. Trenckner 1979, 161). Regarding *puñña* and *pāpa* arahants are completely have transcended both merit and demerit (Narada 1993, 40) but they consist of ten wholesome qualities. Though merit is admirable it always associates with defilements. To be aware of the Buddhist notion on good and bad the paper flows three subthemes; the psychological investigation, result evaluation, and fact and value component to examine the possibility, its universal assumption with paying surface attention to theological and modern philosophical standpoints.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

Buddhist reading on the psychological nature of beings is desire life (*jīvitukāmā*), dislike death (*amaritukāmā*), desire comforts (*sukhakāmā*) and hate sufferings (*dukkhapaṭikkulā*). Refraining from bad and observing good is the part of the noble eightfold path, depicted as the way of practicing Buddhism. Volitional acts made by body, speech, or mind are called kamma. If there is no volition there will be mere actions (Hardy 1994, 415).

Kalamas, lived in Kesaputta, listened to many monks and brahmins who expounded and explained only their own doctrines and despised, reviled, and pulled to pieces the doctrines of others. There were doubt and uncertainty on their explanations whether truth or fault and then, Kalamas visited the Buddha for clarifying. First, the Buddha expressed what they do not accept while highlighting eleven points; do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias toward a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'the monk is our teacher.' Afterward, the Buddha conveyed the responsibility to decide what is good and bad by them. Abandon from them while considering 'these things are bad (*akusalam*), blamable (*sāvajjam*), censured by the wise (*viññūgarahitā*), undertaking and observing these things lead to harm and ill (*ahitāya dukkhāya*) and enter on and abide in them while taking into account 'these things are good (*kusalam*), not blamable

(*anavajjam*), are praised by the wise (*viññūpasatthā*), undertaking and observing these things lead to benefit and happiness (*hitāya sukhāya*).

The interesting point here in this sutta is that it expresses the psychological base to make a decision whether something is good or bad. The action based on unwholesome roots; greed, hatred, and delusion is bad and creates troubles. The absence of them is good and creates benefits.

What do you think, Kalamas? When greed arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm? For his harm Bhante. Kalamas, a greed person, overcome by greed, with mind obsessed by it, destroys life, takes what is not given, transgresses with another's wife, and speaks falsehood; and encourages others to do likewise. Will that lead to his harm and suffering for a long time. Yes, Bhante.

What do you think, Kalamas? When hatred arises in a person, is it for his welfare or for his harm? For his harm Bhante. Kalamas, a person who is full of hate, overcome by hatred, with mind obsessed by it, destroys life, takes what is not given, transgresses with another's wife, and speaks falsehood; and encourages others to do likewise. Will that lead to his harm and suffering for a long time. Yes, Bhante (Bodhi 2012, 280).

In the same manner, the discussion goes asking about the delusion. The discussion confirms their bad, blamable, censured nature and lead to harm and ill who undertaken and observed greed, hate, and delusion. Same time, the Buddha expresses the benefit and happiness which occur with the absence of greed, hate, and delusion.

These six roots are facilitated for arising good and bad actions physically, verbally and mentally. Buddhism emphasizes tenfold unwholesome actions; killing, stealing and sexual misconduct as physical; lying, gossip, harmful words, and slander as verbal; and covetousness, ill-will and wrong view as mental. Having refrained from them cultivate non-violence, taking what is given, telling truth etc. are highly admired as good. All good and bad dealings are based on the mind and also covetousness, ill-will and wrong view are clearly identified as mental actions. The very first two verses in the

Dhammapada states;

Mind is the forerunner of (all evil) states. Mind is chief, mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with wicked mind, because of that, suffering follows one, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the draught-ox.

Mind is the forerunner of (all good) states. Mind is chief, mind-made are they. If one speaks or acts with pure mind, because of that, happiness follows one, even as one's shadow that never leaves. (Narada 1993, 1, 5)

One who thinks to go to a temple and worship the Buddha fills his or her mind with wholesome thoughts of loving kindness. When he talks about it mind fills with loving kindness words and when he does it mindfully with loving kindness bodily actions. Hence, Buddhism always promotes wholesome and demotes unwholesome actions via the noble eightfold path. The fourfold right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), the fifth pillar proves the above fact. The desire for the non-arising of unrisen evil unwholesome states, desire for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states, desire for the arising of unrisen wholesome states, and desire for the continuance of arisen wholesome states, for which he makes efforts, arouses energy, exerts his mind, and endeavors are right effort. (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2009, 1100; Chalmers 1977, 251).

Commentarial discussion on two kinds of misconducts; acts criticized by people in general (*loka-vajja*) and acts criticized by the training rules (*paññatti-vajja*) is also paid sufficient attention to volitional acts. The Buddha's disciples bound to both, Buddhist disciplinary codes which comes under Vinaya pitaka and the *Pātimokkha* and acts criticized by people in general. As a member of the Bhikkhu or Bhikkhuni Order, they should follow all disciplinary codes and at the same time since he or she is a member of the common society refrain from accepted rules is also essential. *Paññatti-vajja* is most probably subjective. For determining penalties five factors; the *effort*, the *perception*, the *intention* motivating it, the *object*, and the *result* should be completed. If there are no five factors sometimes it cannot be a full offence. All five factors have to be present for a full offense under the *pārājikā* rule, killing human beings. Otherwise, it

can be another offence but not *pārājikā*.

As a knife can be used for cutting vegetables and also for murder the intention of the action is very significant to decide right and wrong. In early Buddhism, loving kindness admired as a matter of fact for long-term welfare and happiness. But later Buddhist literature sometimes attempts to justify killing for the benefit of the majority. Firstly, the early Buddhist notion should be understood.

Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely, limb by limb with a two-handed saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching. Herein, Bhikkhus, you should train thus. 'Our minds will remain unaffected, and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading them with a mind imbued with loving-kindness; and starting with them, we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, and immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will. That is how you should train Bhikkhus.

Theravada Abhidhamma states 14 unwholesome thoughts namely delusion (*moha*), shamelessness (*ahirika*), fearlessness (*anottappa*), unrest (*uddhacca*), attachment (*lobha*), wrong view (*ditṭhi*), conceit (*māna*), hatred (*dosa*), jealousy (*issā*), avarice (*macchariya*), worry (*kukkucca*), sloth (*thīna*), torpor (*middha*), doubt (*vicikicchā*) and 19 beautiful thoughts namely confidence (*saddhā*), mindfulness (*sati*), shame (*hiri*), fear (*ottappa*), non-attachment (*alobha*), goodwill (*adosa*), equanimity (*tatramajjhataṭā*), tranquility of mental states (*kāyapassaddhi*), tranquility of mind (*cittapassaddhi*) etc. (Narada, 1989, 76-78). Hence, summarily Buddhism understands the psychological nature of mind intrinsically associated with good and bad thoughts but it promotes only wholesome not unwholesome thoughts.

On the contrary to the above standpoint, Baka-jātaka, Sigāla-jātaka, Vaḍḍhakīsūkara-jātaka in the Jātaka stories, the king Duṭṭhagāmini's incident depicted in the Mahāvamsa etc. are examples for later Buddhist notion. A crane ate all fish in a pond by misleading with the promise to bring them to a distance pond where

water was plentiful and the last subsistence in this trap was a crab. The wily crab cuts off the crane's head while the crane was trying to eat the crab. Having seen this, the Bodhisattva, lived in a tree nearby as a 'tree fairy' and happily appreciated while saying *sādhu* means well (Fausboll 2000, 221- 223) while. *Vaḍḍhakīsūkara-jātaka* states that the Bodhistava was a boar and it grew up as a carpenter's house and was named 'carpenter's boar' (*Vaḍḍhakīsūkara*). Time being, it went back to the forest and associated with a gang of a boar who had trouble from a tiger that was directed by a false ascetic. Finally, the Bodhisattva young boar provided the leadership to kill both the tiger and the ascetic (Fausboll 2003, 403 - 409). Considering the above discussion, it is to be summarized, early Buddhist standpoint to decide good and bad based on wholesome and unwholesome roots of thoughts. Though the early discourses do not facilitate for violence research will be useful on later standpoint and its relevance to holy war that expressed in some other religions including Hinduism. Consequently, it seems, the notion in early Buddhism on loving kindness represents hard universalism while later Buddhist standpoint connects with subjectivism.

### CONSEQUENCES OF ACTIONS EVALUATION

Consequences of actions evaluation are the second point. Reflecting on (*paccavekkhitvā*) the result of the actions made by bodily, verbally and mentally is also recommended way to decide what is good or bad. The *Ambalaṭṭhikā-rāhulovāda sutta* express the Buddha's preaching to Rahula Thera the way of reflection on own actions based on holy life. Nevertheless, this discussion can be commonly used to decide good and bad with the reflection on the consequences. In this point, the consequences of one's action are reflected by the side of self, others and both. One's bodily action is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both it would be an unskilled bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results. Hence, that bodily action should be given up. If that action is not leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, pleasant results. Hence, that bodily action is fit for you to do. Verbal and mental actions are also the same manner. This reflecting method should be followed with the actions that are willing to do, doing

and done; in other words, reflection is essential on behalf of future, present, and past actions. Reflection on past action that led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both an unskillful should be revealed to the Buddha or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having revealed it, one should be exercised restraint (*āyatisaṃvara*) in the future (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2009, 523-526; Chalmers 1977, 414-420).

Two verses of the Dhammapada state the summary of good and bad action based on the result.

That deed is not well done when, after having done it, one repents, and when, weeping with tearful face, one reaps the fruit thereof.

That deed is well done when after having done it, one repents not, and when, with joy and pleasure, one reaps the fruit thereof. (Narada 1993, 66, 67)

According to the Buddhist discourses including the Kalama sutta, to refute or accept the viewpoint of wise is also considered. Not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove is a quality of one who is skilled in goodness. Buddhist notion on wise is based on the concept of *paññā* and *duppaññā*. One who uses his knowledge for unwholesome actions is unwise and uses for wholesome is wise in the ethical sense. Social influence for choosing good and bad that occurred in a proper channel is admired but there is no room for wise who misused their knowledge.

Since sensual pleasures provide a little gratification it can mislead consumers as happiness but really they are much suffering, despair, and danger. Hence, consumers should understand three facts; gratification (*assāda*), danger (*ādīnava*) and escape (*nissaraṇa*). The simile of the skeleton, piece of meat, grass torch, pit of coals, dream, borrowed goods, fruits of a tree, butcher's knife and block, sword stake, snake's head are provided early discourses to understand the danger of sensual pleasures (Nānamoli & Bodhi 2009: p. 226). Since danger (*ādīnava*) is the consequences of actions it facilitates to decide what is good and bad. As a young woman or a young man who attempts to remove a speck of dirt in own face looking at in a mirror or in a basin of clear water and be happy, a Bhikkhu should

review his own mind and trains wholesome states. (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009: 193).

### FACT AND VALUE COMPONENT

Fact and Value component is the third point needed to be discussed here. The concept flourished in the 1920s and 1930s in Europe through logical positivism. First, sayings cannot be proved whether it is true or fault was rejected by logical positivists. But later on, though it cannot be directly proved as true or fault neo-logical positivism sought many values in ethical, religious, and aesthetic sayings. The concept of comparing others with oneself (*attūpanāyika-damma-pariyāya*) is also a path to understanding good and bad. In ethics, it considers as 'Golden Rule' and it is a maxim in many religions and cultures. In this case, the self is the fact and ethical behaviors which occur with comparing others with one are values.

The explanation given to Nālaka about the *moneyya* practice in the Nālaka-sutta of the Suttanipāta is a summary of the fact and value component.

'Comparing one's own self "As I am so are they, as they are so am I" he shall not kill nor cause to kill. *Yathā ahaṃ tathā ete, yathā ete tathā ahaṃ; katvā, na haneyya na ghātaye* (Jayawikrama 2001, 274).

The Veḷudvāreyya-sutta in the Saṃyuttanikāya clearly expresses this dhamma theory to brahmin Veludvāra. His question was about the way for a good destination and a heavenly world after death. The Buddha preached the dhamma to him not to be in the fourfold bad destination; hell, animal realm, the domain of ghosts, and the plane of misery and to enter stream-enterer, no longer bound to the nether world fixed in destiny with the enlightenment as destination.

Here a noble disciple reflects thus: 'I am one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die; I desire happiness and am averse to suffering. Since I am one who wishes to live... and am averse to suffering, if someone were to take my life, that would not be pleasing and agreeable to me. Now, if I were to take the life of another - of one who wishes to live, who does not wish to die, who desire happiness and is averse to suffering - that would not be pleasing and

agreeable to the other either. What is displeasing and disagreeable to me is displeasing and disagreeable to the other two. How can I inflict upon another what is displeasing and disagreeable to me? Having reflected thus he himself abstains from the destruction of life, exhorts others to abstain from the destruction of life, and speaks in praise of abstinence from the destruction of life. Thus this bodily conduct of his is purified in three respects (Bodhi 2000, 1797; Feer 1976, 353).

Three points are highlighted in this teaching. The first is the intrinsic nature of beings like wishes to live, does not wish to die, desire happiness and averse to suffering. The second is how to reflect positive and negative manner based on own like and dislike. This is considered as the 'Golden Rule' according to the modern interpretation. The third fact emphasizes the social engagement because it does not a mere discussion on abstaining from the self-destruction of life. The attempt is meant to convey for others to abstain from the destruction of taking life and speaks in praise of abstinence from the destruction of life while one who has self-control. Hence, Buddhist standpoint on the theory of fact and value does not believe that self-control is enough to complete this teaching. Exhorting others and praising on this ethics support for the improvement of own practice but it gains calm and peaceful society.

Following two verses depicted in the Dhammapada like a summary of this teaching.

All tremble at the rod. All fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither strike nor cause to strike.

All tremble at the rod. Life is dear to all. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither strike nor cause to strike. (Narada 1993, 123, 124)

Fundamentally, nihilism which teaches the viewpoint that no morally right or wrong is completely refuted in Buddhist teachings. Since the other three; ethical relativism, soft universalism, and hard universalism basically accepts moral behaviours there is no complete rejection in Buddhism. Buddhist notion of utilizing language, some sekhiyā Vinaya rules represents ethical relativism because those depend on the culture, environment etc. To introduce

a bowl there were several terms in Indian dialects namely; *pāti*, *patta*, *vittha*, *sarāva*, *dhāropa*, *pona*, *pisila*. Language is considered as the commonality of the world, etymology of the world, usage of the world. Finally, it is the convention or agreement (*sammuti*). The Buddha advised to his disciples not grasp on to the way of the etymology of the country and not overstretch commonality while preaching the Discourse on the Analysis of Non-conflict, Araṇavibhaṅga (Kalupahana 1999 48-50; Charlmers 1977, 234). In this respect, the Buddhist standpoint is merged with ethical relativism.

Fact and value component states seven ethical behaviors; three in bodily namely killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and four in verbally namely false speech, divisive speech, harsh speech and frivolous speech to practice comparing others with oneself. No one likes to die, no one likes to take from him what he has not given, no one likes someone were to commit adultery with his wife, no one likes someone were to damage his or her welfare with false speech etc. Based on the above facts, taking oneself as an example one should refrain from them. That is the value component. Hence, this theory seems associated with hard universalism but the sexual misconduct is questionable because very rarely there are some people likes someone is to commit adultery with his wife.

## CONCLUSION

Religion and philosophy have given an appreciable involvement to convey what is good and what bad all over the history. Buddhism plays both roles through psychological investigation, result evaluation, and fact and value component. The concept of merit (*puñña*) and demerit (*pāpa*) are linked with religious sense while wholesome/skillful (*kusala*) and unwholesome/unskillful (*akusala*) are merged abundantly with philosophy. In other words, the first pair associates with the *samsāra* and the second is with *nibbāna*. Taking into account the psychological nature of mind based on its root causes greed, hatred and delusion and non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion are a commonly accepted method. But delusion is rather disputable because it seems dependence on own beliefs. Belief on god is truth for the believer but it will be a delusion for the non-theistic follower. The consequence of actions

evaluation based on self, others and both are also meaningful because it considers individuality and society. In this respect, if something is good for self it does not mean bad. If something is good for self but harm for others is bad. The same manner, if something is good for others but harm for self is bad. The best practice is what is good for both self and others. Fact and value component is also useful for self-judgment to decide what is good and bad. In brief, Buddhism rejects nihilism directly but there are rooms for cultural relativism, soft universalism, and hard universalism. Buddhist standpoint on good and bad considering the psychological base, the result of actions and fact and value component are provided remarkable and universal light to the subject but that is not the ultimate path.

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