

The MaMa Charitable Foundation Visiting Professor in
Buddhist Studies
 Lecture Series 2013

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Professor Karunadasa is a renowned scholar and expert specialized in Early Buddhism and Theravada Abhidhamma. He has served as Chair Professor of Pāli at the University of Kelaniya, Visiting Professor and Commonwealth Academic Staff Fellow at School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and several other well-respected positions. Over the years, he has devoted himself to the in-depth study of various manifestations of Buddhism, including Buddhist psychology, relationship between Buddhism, science and realism, Buddhist teaching on the moral life, leading to the production of over 60 important academic publications.

The
**Relevance of
 MORALITY**

Lecture 1

Date:
 March 9, 2013 (Sat)
 Time:
 3:00-5:00 p.m.

Venue:
 CPD 304, 3/F,
 Run Run Shaw Tower (Art), Centennial Campus,
 The University of Hong Kong

**Pursuit of
 HAPPINESS**

Lecture 2

Date:
 April 13, 2013 (Sat)
 Time:
 3:00-5:00 p.m.

Venue:
 CPD 304, 3/F,
 Run Run Shaw Tower (Art), Centennial Campus,
 The University of Hong Kong

**Buddhism and
 the Issue of
 RELIGIOUS
 Fundamentalism**

Lecture 3

Date:
 April 27, 2013 (Sat)
 Time:
 3:00-5:00 p.m.

Venue:
 CPD 304, 3/F,
 Run Run Shaw Tower (Art), Centennial Campus,
 The University of Hong Kong



Conducted in English | All are Welcome | No Registration Required | For Enquiries : 3917 5078 or cbsinfo@hku.hk

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The MaMa Charitable Foundation

The Relevance of Morality: How Buddhism Sees It

**Professor Emeritus
 Y. Karunadasa**

Professor Karunadasa's public lecture on The Relevance of
 Morality: How Buddhism Sees It

3/9/2013

1. Why should we be Morally Good?

The question arises because the Buddha himself refers to three theories, which do not recognize the need to practise morality:

- a) Moral Nihilism (*Natthikavāda*) based on Materialism (*Ucchedavāda*)**
- b) Moral Non-consequence-ism (*Akiriyaavāda*)**
- c) Moral Non-causalism (*Ahetukavāda*)**

2. How should we be Morally Good?

The question arises because of the following reasons:

- a) The presence of many religions with different moral teachings.**
- b) The theory of Moral Relativism which says that what is morally good and bad changes from time to time, and from place to place.**
- c) Moral Authoritarianism which says that all moral injunctions should come from a Higher Moral Authority, a Personal God or an Impersonal Godhead.**

3. The Buddhist Response to these Moral Issues

The Buddhist response to these moral issues can be found in the well-known Kālāma Discourse of the Buddha. One day, when the Buddha visited a small town called Kesaputta, its residents called Kālāmas told the Buddha:

Venerable sir, religious teachers of different persuasions came to us and presented to us moral teachings, one different from another. Therefore, we have doubt and uncertainty as to who among these venerable teachers spoke the truth. How are we to decide on this matter?

4. The Buddha's Response to the Kālāmas' Moral Dilemma

Yes, Kālāmas, it is proper that you have doubt, that you have uncertainty, for a doubt has arisen in a matter which is doubtful.

Now, look, you Kālāmas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by the authority of religious texts, or by mere logic or inference, or by considering appearances, or by the delight in speculative opinions, or by seeming possibilities, or by the idea: “this is what our teacher says.” But, O Kālāmas, when you know for yourselves that certain things are bad and unwholesome, then give them up. And when you know for yourselves that certain things are good and wholesome, then accept them and follow them.

5. How One should Decide on the Moral Issue

The Buddha's advice to the Kālāmas as to how they themselves could decide on what is morally bad and unwholesome and what is morally good and wholesome is as follows:

The Buddha:

Now, what do you think, Kālāmas? When greed arises within a man, does it arise to his profit or to his loss?

The Kālāmas: **To his loss, Sir.**

5. How One should Decide on the Moral Issue (continued)

The Buddha:

Now, Kālāmas, does not this man, thus become greedy, being overcome by greed and losing control of his mind, -- does he not kill a living creature, take what is not given, go after another's wife, tell lies and lead another into such a state as causes his loss and sorrow for a long time?

The Kālāmas: He does, Sir.

5. How One should Decide on the Moral Issue (continued)

Then the Buddha tells the Kālāmas that when a person is overcome with hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*), he behaves in such a way that causes harm to himself as well as others.

Then the Buddha tells the Kālāmas that when a person is free from greed, hatred, and delusion, what he does is beneficial to himself as well as others.

In this way, the Buddha was able to convince the Kālāmas of the undesirability of doing what is morally bad and the desirability of doing what is morally good.

6. The Authority of Self-Experience

The message of the Kālāma Discourse:

**In deciding upon what is morally good and bad,
we need not go by the authority of religions,
or by the authority of religious teachers,
or by the authority of religious texts.**

**Rather, in deciding upon what is morally good and bad
we should go by the Authority of our own Self-Experience.**

7. Self-Comparison as a Guide to Moral Action

a) All tremble at violence; all fear death.

Putting oneself in the place of another,

One should not kill; nor cause another to kill.

(Dhammapada, the Buddhist Anthology of Ethical Verses)

7. Self-Comparison as a Guide to Moral Action (continued)

b) Here, a noble disciple reflects thus:

“I like to live. I do not like to die. I desire happiness and dislike unhappiness. Suppose someone should kill me, since I like to live and do not like to die, it would not be pleasing and delightful to me. Suppose I too should kill another who likes to live and does not like to die, who desires happiness and does not desire unhappiness, it would not be pleasing and delightful to the other person either. How could I inflict on another that which is not pleasant and delightful to me.”

Having reflected in this manner, he, on his own, refrains from killing, and speaks in praise of refraining from killing. (Majjhima Nikaya)

8. Self–Reflection as a Guide to Moral Action

This we find in the Buddha’s advice to his own son, Rāhula:

The Buddha:

“What do you think, Rāhula? What is the purpose of a mirror?”

Rāhula: **“For the purpose of reflection, venerable sir”.**

The Buddha:

“So too, Rāhula, an action with the body should be done after repeated reflection.

An action by speech should be done after repeated reflection.

An action by mind should be done after repeated reflection.”

Before one performs an act one should be thoughtful of its consequences for one-self as well as for others.

9. How Buddhism looks at the Moral Order

- a)** The moral order is not an imposition from above by a Supreme Creator God. Rather, the moral order is inherent in life. It is an instance of moral causation.
- b)** Therefore, Buddhism does not have a set of moral commandments; nor does Buddhism have a system of reward and punishment.
- c)** The moral order is not an invention on the part of the Buddha. Rather, it is a discovery by the Buddha. Therefore, for Buddhism what really matters is not the historicity of the Discoverer (the Buddha), but the validity of the Discovery (the moral order).

10. Kamma and its Results as the Causality of the Moral Order

- a)** Karma means intention or volition. Therefore, Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intention.
- b)** What determine the moral quality of karmic actions are the three roots of moral evil, namely greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*); and the three roots of moral wholesomeness, namely absence of greed and presence of generosity, absence of hatred and presence of compassionate love, and absence of delusion and presence of wisdom.

11. Why the Moral Order is Universally Applicable

Greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*) and their opposites are not confined to one geographical region, nor are they confined to one historical period.

So the Buddhist evaluation of what is morally good and what is morally bad is not relative in the sense that it does not change in relation to shifting social conventions, cultural norms, government-enforced laws, or political ideologies.

12. The Priority of Morality

Why and how moral practice (*sīla*) should precede the development of concentration (*samādhi*) and realization of wisdom (*paññā*).

There is a clearly presented psychological theory behind this idea.

According to this theory, all our moral evil activates at three levels.

The first level is *anusaya*, which means “asleep”. This is the level at which our moral evil remains dormant in the form latent tendencies.

12. The Priority of Morality (continued)

The second level is *pariyuṭṭhāna*, which means “arising all around”. This is the level where what remained earlier as latent proclivities are now fully awake. This is what we experience as excited emotions or mental turbulence.

The third level is *vītikkaṃa*, which means “going beyond”. This is the level at which our emotions and excited feelings express themselves in the form of vocal and physical actions.

The third level is the most dangerous, but the easiest to control.

The task of controlling this level is assigned to morality (*sīla*).

13. The Role of Knowledge and Awareness in the Practice of Moral Life

In this connection, Uggahamana, a religious teacher who lived during the time of the Buddha, says:

“A person who does not do an evil act with his body, speaks no evil speech, intends no evil intention, leads no evil livelihood is, to that extent, morally perfect, even if he is not aware of his moral perfection.”

13. The Role of Knowledge and Awareness in the Practice of Moral Life (continued)

The Buddha's response to Uggahamana's idea of moral perfection:

“If this were so, even a young baby-boy, lying on his back, would be morally perfect. A young baby-boy lying on his back, does not think of his own body. How, then, could he do an evil deed with his body, except for a little kicking about? He does not think of his own voice. How, then could he utter an evil speech, except for a little crying? He does not think about his own intention. How, then, could he lead an evil mode of livelihood, except for taking his mother's milk?”

14. The Issue of One's Own Good and the Good of Others

In this connection the Buddha says:

Herein a certain person is one who abstains from taking life, from stealing and so forth. This person is called “the worthy man”.

Herein a certain person not only himself abstains from taking life and so forth, but also encourages others to abstain from doing so. This person is called “the still more worthy man”. (Saṃyutta Nikāya)

From this we conclude: One who pursues one's own moral good is morally good, but one who pursues one's own moral good as well as others' moral good is better.

14. The Issue of One's Own Good and the Good of Others (continued)

In this connection the Buddha says again:

**“Monks, one who takes care of oneself, takes care of others.
One who takes care of others, takes care of oneself.”**

Illustrating this situation, the Buddha recounts:

**“Once in the past an acrobat set up his bamboo pole and said to his apprentice: ‘Climb the bamboo pole and stand on my shoulders’.
When the apprentice did so, the acrobat said: ‘you protect me,
I’ll protect you.’**

14. The Issue of One's Own Good and the Good of Others (continued)

Thus guarded by one another, we'll display our skills, collect our fee, and get down safely from the bamboo pole.'

Then the apprentice said: 'that's not the way to do it, master. You protect yourself, master, and I'll protect myself. Thus each self-guarded and self-protected, we'll display our skills, collect our fee, and get down safely from the bamboo pole.'"

(Saṃyutta Nikāya)

15. Morality and Religion: Which is more Important?

The question arises because some religions make a distinction between morality and religion.

16. The Buddha's Incontrovertible Argument (Apañṇaka Sutta) as to why one should lead a Moral Life, even if one does not believe in any religion.

In a situation where there is no certainty of conviction, the most rational approach for a rational and open-minded person (*viññū puriso*) is to reflect thus:

“Even if there is no life after death, if I lead a morally bad life in this life itself, I will be condemned by the wise for my moral misbehaviour. If, on the other hand, there is going to be life after death, I will suffer in the life after, as well. Thus, I am bound to suffer in both worlds. On the other hand, if I lead a morally good life, even if there is no life after death, I will be praised by the wise in this very life for my good behaviour. And, if there is going to be life after death, then I will be happy in the next life as well. Thus, I am bound to both worlds.”

Epilogue

All living beings, the Buddha says, desire happiness and recoil from suffering (*sabbe sattā sukhakāmā, dukkha-paṭikkulā*).

Therefore, in the Buddhist Song on Compassionate Love (Metta Sutta), the Buddha admonishes us:

Even as a mother protects with her life,
Her child, her own child,
So with a boundless heart,
Should one cherish all living beings.

Thank You for Your Kind Attention.

Question & Answer