

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF BUDDHIST MORALITY

Y. KARUNADASA

1. The theory and the practice of Buddhist morality begins with Right View (*samma ditthi*). However, Buddhism does not endorse dogmatic attachment to views, even if 'they are right'. To be infatuated with "the rightness of our own views" is called "*sanditthi-raga*". "Dogmatic adherence to views" is called "*ditthi-paramasa*". The root cause of both is the mistaken belief, "this alone is true, all else is false" (*idam eva saccam, mogham annam = idam-saccabhinivesa*) (see *Suttanipata*, PTS. v. 895; *Majjhimanikaya*, PTS II 171; *Dhammasangani*, PTS 1498). Its external manifestations are acts of fanaticism and militant piety, indoctrination and unethical conversion, inter-religious and intra-religious wars, secular and religious fundamentalism. From the Buddhist point of view, dogmatic attachment to views and ideologies is exponentially more detrimental and fraught with more danger than our greedy attachment to material objects. For Buddhism, a view is only a guide to action.

2. The theory and the practice of Buddhist morality is based on the "Middle Path" (*majjhima patipada*). While spiritual eternalism (*sassatavada*) and materialist nihilism (*ucchedavada*) lead to self-mortification and sensual indulgence, the Buddhist practice keeps itself equally aloof from both. Therefore, the Buddhist practice of morality is called the Middle Path (*majjhima patipada*). It is another expression for the Noble Eight-fold Path (*ariyo atthangiko maggo*).

3. The Buddhist moral theory is based on three cardinal principles. These are called (1) *kammavada*, (2) *kiriyaavada*, and (3) *viriyavada*.

4. When understood in a broad sense, *kammavada* means the recognition of a moral order. It is the direct opposite of moral nihilism, which denies the validity of moral distinctions and questions the possibility of moral consequences. The second, *kiriyaavada* is the recognition of the efficacy of moral actions. It provides a causal correlation to our moral actions and their consequences. It stands in opposition to moral non-causation (*ahetukavada*). The third, *kiriyaavada* is the doctrine that justifies the necessity and desirability of the role of human effort in pursuing the moral life. (*Dighanikaya*, PTS I, 115; *Samyuttanikaya*, PTS II 33; *Anguttaranikaya*, PTS I 287; *Vinaya*, PTS I 71.)

4. In conforming to these three principles, Buddhism avoids strict determinism, viz. theistic determinism as well as karmic determinism. The first maintains that everything is due to a creator God (*sabbam issara-nimmana-hetu*). The second maintains that everything is due to past karma (*sabbam pubbekata-hetu*). These two deterministic theories fail to establish the efficacy of moral actions and the role of human effort in practicing the moral life.

5. For Buddhism, the moral order is not an imposition by a supreme God. Nor is it an invention on the part of the Buddha. The Buddha only discovers it. Hence the Buddha says: "You yourselves ought to do what ought to be done. The Buddhas show the way". (*Tumhehi kiccam atappam; akkhataro Tathagata*).

6. The Buddha is not a savior who redeems mankind. He is the Awakened One who shows the way to others' awakening, the awakening from the slumber of ignorance.

7. Accordingly, we need to understand the moral teachings in Buddhism, not as injunctions and commandments. Rather, they are guidelines for moral action. They are descriptive, not prescriptive. Their purpose is to show the way, not to coerce. Accordingly, morally good actions are not rewarded. Nor are morally bad actions punished. Rather, they have their own consequences according to the principles of moral causation.

8. Wholesome moral actions are called "kusala", i. e, skillful. Unwholesome moral actions are called "akusala", i. e. unskillful. Here we have two psychological terms used to express what is morally good and bad. This shows the close connection between Buddhist ethics and Buddhist psychology.

9. Buddhism traces all moral evil and moral good to six radical roots. They are lobha (greed, passion, covetousness), dosa (hatred, aversion), and moha (delusion, ignorance), and their opposites: alobha (non-greed), adosa (non-hatred), and amoha (non-delusion).

9. The premise behind this moral evaluation is that a mind which is obsessed with greed, malice, and delusion is a mind that is "defiled" (kilittha-citta), "diseased" (atura-citta), and "in bondage" (avimutta-citta). On the other hand, when the mind has opposite qualities, namely, generosity, compassionate love and wisdom, it experiences the positive qualities of mental purity, mental health and mental freedom. As the commentarial exegesis observes, when we have "kusala" qualities, we experience "mental health" (arogya), "mental purity" (anavajjata), "mental dexterity" (cheka), all resulting in "mental ease and felicity" (sukha-vipaka) (Dhammasangani Atthakatha, PTS, pp. 60, 63).

10 Kamma and the Criteria of Moral Evaluation

The term 'kamma' literally means 'action'. However, the Buddha gives it a psychological meaning when he defines it as 'volition', or 'willed action' (cetana): "I declare, O monks, that volition is moral action. Having willed one acts by body, speech, and mind" (Anguttaranikaya, PTS III 415). It is not the action, but the intentionality of the action, that is recognized as moral action per se. If I simply raise my arm, that is not kamma. Though if I raise it with the intention of assaulting someone, then that intention translates that action into kamma. For any action to be morally responsible, it has to be carried out with a purposeful intention. Only willed action produces an effect that is eventually experienced by the actor, while the nature of the effect will be determined by the intention with which the action is performed.

11. Kamma manifests in three different ways: mentally, vocally, and physically. Kamma which is volition should be clearly distinguished from its result, which is called vipaka. Both kamma and vipaka are part of our psychological experience. The result of kamma could be experienced either in this life (ditthe'va dhamme), or in the next life (upapajje), or in future lives (apare va pariyaye).

12. The ethical quality of kamma depends on the six radical roots of moral evil and moral good. Greed (lobha), aversion (dosa) and delusion (moha) are the three roots of moral evil. Greed covers all degrees of ego-centric desire, longing, attachment and grasping. Aversion includes all forms of ill-will, anger,

animosity, irritation and annoyance, along with so-called righteous anger and moral indignation. Aversion can range from mild irritability to uncontrollable rage. Delusion is ignorance. It is the absence of clear comprehension and objectivity. As the commentarial exegesis says, it is “mind’s blindness”.

13. Absence of greed (alobha), absence of aversion (adosa) and absence of delusion (amoha), are the three roots of moral good. The first root refers not only to the absence of greed, but also to its positive manifestations as charity, liberality, and renunciation. The second root refers not only to the absence of aversion, but also to the positive qualities of amity, goodwill, gentleness, benevolence and loving kindness. The third root refers to knowledge, understanding and wisdom.

14. Kamma-based Buddhist ethics is an ethics of intention, an ethics of volition. It is an ethics with universal application. Greed, aversion, and delusion, along with their opposites, are commonly experienced by all unenlightened human beings. They are not confined to one geographical region, nor are they confined to one historical period. Therefore, the Buddhist evaluation of what is morally good, and what is morally bad, does not change in relation to shifting social conventions, cultural norms, government-enforced laws, or political ideologies.

15. The moral teachings in Buddhism are not injunctions and commandments. They are guidelines for moral action. They are not coercive, but persuasive. They are more descriptive than prescriptive. This means that morally good and bad actions are neither rewarded nor punished. Rather, they have their own consequences according to the principles of moral causation.

16. There is no mechanical one-to-one correspondence between kamma and its consequence. If, for instance, a person kills someone, it is not the case that he too will be killed as a consequence of his kamma. From the Buddhist perspective, the consequence of kamma is certainly not tit for tat, an eye for an eye. The Buddhist teaching on kamma has nothing to do with revengeful justice. What we find in Buddhism is not kammic determinism, but kammic conditionality.

17. According to the Buddhist teaching on kamma, one does not have to accept the results of kamma with a sense of resignation and submission. The Buddha espouses, not only ‘moral life’ (kammavada) but also ‘the efficacy of human effort’ (viriyavada) as well.

The issue of One’s Own Good and Others’ Good:

18. The Buddhist view on this issue: One who pursues one’s own moral good is “*morally good*”. On the other hand, one who pursues one’s own moral good, as well as others’ moral good is “*morally better*”.

19. This idea comes into focus by a classification of individuals into four groups:

The individual who pursues neither his own well-being nor others’ well-being

The individual who pursues others’ well-being but not his own well-being

The individual who pursues his own well-being but not others’ well-being

The individual who pursues his own well-being as well as others’ well-being (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, II 95).

20. The four individuals are mentioned according to an ascending order of excellence. The first is the worst. The fourth is the best. It is clear why this is so. But, what is intriguing is why, the individual who pursues his own well-being without pursuing others well-being, is better than the person who pursues others' well-being but not his own.

21. The answer to this question comes from the following words of the Buddha, addressed to a person called Cunda: "It is not possible, Cunda, for one who is stuck in the mud to pull out another who is also stuck in the mud. But, Cunda, it is possible for one who is not stuck in the mud, to pull out another who is stuck in the mud. Similarly it is not possible, Cunda, for one who is himself not tamed, not disciplined, without extinguished defilements, to tame and discipline another and help extinguish his defilements." (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, I 45).

22. This illustration draws our attention to two equally important points: The first is that one who is stuck in the mud of moral depravity cannot save another, who is in the same predicament. The second is that who has pursued his own moral well-being, is in a sure position to help others to pursue their own moral well-being.

23. It is, in fact, after realizing his own moral perfection that the Buddha began his teaching for the moral uplift of others. This idea is also exemplified by the Buddha's advice to the earliest Arahants to go forth and teach the Dhamma "for the benefit, well-being, and happiness of the many."

24. It is not that others' moral well-being is less important than our own, or that our moral well-being is more important than others'. If we give priority to our own moral well-being first, then we are in a better position to help others. What is taken into account is not "whose moral well-being is more important", but "whose moral well-being should get priority".

25. The benefits of moral cultivation are reciprocal. Moral cultivation has an individual as well as a social dimension. When it comes to moral life, the very distinction between our own good and the good of others tends to get obliterated. Hence the Buddha says: "Monks, one who takes care of oneself, takes care of others; one who takes care of others, takes care of oneself. How, monks, is it that one who takes care of oneself takes care of others? It is by moral training, moral culture, and moral development. And how, monks, is it that one who takes care of others, takes care of oneself? It is by forbearance, by harmlessness, by good will, and compassion" (Samyuttanikaya, PTS. V 169). 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 and I'll protect you. 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, teacher. You protect yourself, teacher, 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." (Connected Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Samyuttanikaya, Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1648).

26. According to Buddhism, a person who is practicing moral life should be fully aware that he is practicing the moral life. Without knowledge and awareness, moral practice is of no use. A person who is morally perfect, but who is not aware of his moral perfection, is not morally perfect.

27. We find this situation well illustrated in the Buddha's response to the idea of moral perfection, as taught by Uggahamana, a contemporary religious teacher. In his view, "a person is perfected in what is wholesome, when he does not do an evil act with his body, speaks no evil speech, intends no evil intention, leads no evil livelihood." Apparently this is how the Buddha himself teaches moral perfection. All the same, the Buddha found it necessary to make the following observation:

"If that were so, then a young tender infant lying prone is accomplished in what is wholesome. For a young tender infant lying prone, does not even have the notion 'body', so how should he do an evil bodily action beyond mere wriggling? He does not even have the notion of 'speech', so how should he utter evil speech beyond mere whining? He does not even have the notion 'intention', so how does he have evil intention beyond mere suckling. He does not even have the notion of 'livelihood', so how should he make his living by evil livelihood, beyond being suckled at his mother's breast?" (Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, tr. Majjhimanikaya, PTS, 649).

28. The naïve innocence of a baby-boy cannot be equated with moral perfection. The baby-boy's naïve innocence is based on sheer ignorance, not on awareness. It is not deliberately cultivated. To give an example: As we all know, elephants and some other animals in the wild forest are vegetarians. Yet surely, it is not after pondering on the virtues of vegetarianism that they have become so. Their physical constitution is such that they have to become vegetarians.

29. The moral perfection that Buddhism speaks of has to be grounded on knowledge, should culminate on knowledge. "Just as a man, whose hands and feet are cut off, knows that his hands and feet are cut off, even so one who is morally perfect, whether he is walking or standing still or sleep or awake, in him there is constant and perpetual presence of knowledge to the effect that all mental defilements are destroyed by him." (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, II 68).

30. The same idea is expressed in a division of individuals into four groups: The first has a blemish, but he does not know: 'I have a blemish in myself'. The second also has a blemish, but he knows: 'I have a blemish in myself'. Between them the second is better than the first. The third has no blemish, but he does not know: 'I have no blemish in myself'. The fourth has no blemish, but he knows: 'I have no blemish in myself'. The fourth is better than the third. (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, I, 25 ff).

31. The Buddhist theory of morality does not assume that either the sense-organs or the sense-objects are in themselves an obstacle to moral culture. "If two oxen, one white and the other black, are tied by a yoke, it is not correct to say that the black ox is a bond for the white ox, or that the white ox is a bond for the black ox. It is the yoke that constitutes the bond. In the same way, what becomes an obstacle to mental culture is, neither the sense organ nor the sense object, it is the craving or attachment to the object. This situation is true of the relation between the whole cognitive apparatus, on the one hand, and the external sense-objects, on the other. If it were otherwise, then one would have to rule out the very possibility of the moral life (Samyuttanikaya, PTS, IV 163).

32. A similar idea we find in a Buddhist discourse where the Buddha asks a disciple of a contemporary religious teacher as to how his master teaches mental culture. In reply, he says that the senses are to be trained to the extent that they fail to fulfill their respective functions: the eye does not see forms; the ear does not hear sounds, and so on. The Buddha rejoins that this kind of mental culture shows that the blind and the deaf have their senses best cultivated. (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, III 29).

33. The moral qualities enshrined in the Noble Eightfold Path are intended to ensure (a) happiness in this life (ditthadhamma-sukha), (b) well-being in the life after (samparaya-sukha), and (c) realization of Nibbana (Nibbana-gamini-patipada).

34. If the Right View (samma-ditthi) provides the ideational base for moral life, the second path-factor, Right Intention (samma samkappa) draws our attention to the mind's intentional function, the purposive or volitional aspect of mental activity. It is through this factor that values in conformity with the Right View get properly established. Right Intentions are of three kinds, intentions of renunciation, i.e. intentions free from self-centered desires and ego-centric impulses, intentions free from aversion, and intentions free from harmfulness, i.e. those of benevolence and compassionate love. Such wholesome intentions constitute the psychological foundation for benevolent moral actions. All socially harmful actions, social conflict, violence and oppression can be traced to our evil intentions motivated by greed, malice, and delusion.

35. The next three Path Factors take into account our speech (vaca), physical actions (kammanta), and livelihood (ajiva). They represent the vocal and physical manifestations of our right or wrong intentions, which in turn are conditioned by our right or wrong views. It is at this level our private thoughts and intentions begin to have a concrete impact on the social environment.

36. The Buddhist instruction on Right Speech has four aspects. The first is that it should be dissociated from all falsehood (musavada). Positively, this means devotion to truth that makes one reliable and worthy of confidence. The second is abstention from calumny, or slanderous speech (pisuna vaca), intended to make enmity and division among people. Its opposite is "the speech that heals divisions and promotes amity, harmony and friendship (samaggakarani)". The third is abstention from harsh speech (pharusa vaca). All forms of abuse, insult, and even sarcastic remarks are its many variations. Its opposite is the speech that is "blameless, pleasant to the ear, lovely, reaching to the heart, urbane, pleasing and appealing to the people". Fourthly, Right Speech consists of abstention from frivolous and vain talk (samphappalapa). Its opposite is "meaningful, purposeful, useful and timely speech".

37. Right Speech requires us to refrain from uttering even what is true, if it leads to harmful consequences (anatta-samhita). In uttering what is true one should take into consideration not only its potential effect, but also the proper time for its utterance (kalavadi). The Buddhist instruction on Right Speech enjoins us to exercise our capacity for verbal expression with great caution and circumspection, always being watchful of our words (sada vacanurakkhi).

38. The next path factor is Right Action (samma kammanta). It is concerned with bodily acts. It enjoins abstention from injury to life, and from all forms of violence, "the laying aside of all cudgels and weapons" and positively, the cultivation of love and compassion to all living creatures. Secondly, it enjoins us to abstain from "taking what is not given". All kinds of thievery, robbery, fraudulence through false claims, deceiving customers by using false weights and measures, are some of its myriad variations. Thirdly, Right Action requires us to abstain from wrongful gratification of sensual desires through sexual misconduct or, illicit sexual relations.

39. The fifth Path Factor relates to the necessity of following a morally acceptable means of livelihood (*samma ajiva*). The Buddha mentions five specific modes of livelihood, which are to be avoided, namely, trading in weapons, in human beings, slave trade, for example, butchery and meat production, in poison, and in intoxicating drinks. In brief, any occupation which involves harmful consequences to others is to be considered as morally reprehensible, although it could be materially rewarding.

40. The last three Path Factors, Right Effort (*samma vayama*), Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*), and Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*), form a closely interwoven group involving direct mental training and culture.

41. Right Effort requires us to put forth energy to eliminate unwholesome dispositions and to prevent them from arising anew, and to cultivate and stabilize wholesome dispositions. This Path Factor brings into focus the indispensability of effort, diligence, exertion, and unflagging perseverance for the successful practice of mental culture.

42. The next is Right Mindfulness (*samma sati*). It is the presence of mind, attentiveness, alertness or awareness that plays the role of an inward mentor, watching over and guiding all mental activity. For this purpose, the mind should remain in the present, free from all judgments, evaluations, and interpretations.

42. The last Path Factor is Right Concentration (*samma samadhi*). It is to be realized by unifying the mind. Right Concentration is a necessary prerequisite for wisdom. It is only a properly concentrated mind that can see things as they are (*samahito yathabhutam pajanati*).

43. The use of the term “Path” needs to be understood in its proper context. Any other path, we can leave behind when we have reached the destination. Not so the Noble Eightfold Path. Because the Path Factors are moral qualities to be cultivated, developed, absorbed and internalized.

44. Once the eight Path Factors are fully developed, and brought to perfection, they help to gain two other factors, namely, Right Knowledge (*samma nana*) and Right Emancipation (*samma vimutti*). Right Knowledge means knowledge of the Four Noble Truths. These are the ten qualities, with which a morally wholesome person is endowed with. In this way, the highest level of moral perfection coincides, to a great extent, with the very path that leads to moral perfection.

45. The Buddhist scheme of moral practice has reference to three aspects: (a) moral discipline (*sila*), (b) concentration (*samadhi*), and (c) wisdom (*panna*). These are mutually dependent and gradually progressive towards a higher ideal.

46. Wisdom is insight. It's the mind's ability to see phenomena as they actually are (*yathabhuta- nana*). With the help of a cognitive faculty refined by wisdom, one can observe and identify the roots of moral evil lying dormant in the deep recesses of one's mind. This observation takes place as bare awareness, without allowing the mind to edit or interpret what comes to be observed.

47. For Buddhism, the practice of moral life is a gradual discipline (*anupubba-sikkha*), a gradual course of conduct (*anupubba-cariya*), and a gradual mode of progress (*anupubba-patipada*). The practice involves self-transformation from a lower to a higher level. It has a beginning, an intermediate stage, and a consummation. If moral discipline paves the way to concentration, concentration in turn, paves the way to wisdom.

48. Moral Guidelines: to prevent the surfacing of moral transgression, Buddhism provides with a set of guidelines. One such moral guideline is self-comparison (*attupama*). It invites us to put ourselves in another person's position and to refrain from inflicting on others what we do not wish inflicted on ourselves. As Dhammapada, the Buddhist

Anthology of Ethical Verses, says, "All tremble at punishment, all fear death. Comparing oneself to the other let one refrain from killing others; let one refrain from tormenting others". The same idea is more poignantly expressed in the following quotation:

"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 can 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'. (Samyuttanikaya, PTS, V, 354).

49. Another guideline for moral reasoning is the threefold authority (adhipateyya). It requires us to examine the possible consequences of what we intend to do from three different points of view. The first is self-authority (attadhipateyya). It requires us to examine whether what we intend to do would result in self-blame or repentance. It is case of allowing ourselves to be controlled by ourselves. Public authority (lokadhipateyya) is the second. It requires us to examine whether what we do, would be censored by the intelligent people in the world. This is a case of allowing ourselves to be controlled by public opinion. The third is dhamma-authority (dhammadhipateyya). It requires us to examine whether what we do, is in accord with the moral norm and to avoid all actions that deviate from the moral norm. The concomitants of dhamma-authority are moral shame (hiri) and moral dread (ottappa). They are called "the guardians of the world" (lokapala dhamma), the factors that protect the world from descending to lower levels moral depravity. (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, I, 51).

50. The incontrovertible (infallible) teaching: To some householders who had no faith in any religious teacher, the Buddha recommended the following incontrovertible teaching:

"Even if there is no life after death, a person who leads a morally bad life in this life itself will be censured by the wise. If, on the other hand, there is life after death, he will suffer in the life after as well. Thus he is bound to lose both worlds. If a person leads a morally good life, even if there is no life after death, he will be praised by the wise, in this very life, for his good behavior. And, if there is going to be life after death, he will be happy in the next life as well. Thus he is bound to gain both worlds." (Apannaka Sutta in Majjhimanikaya).

51. The main thrust of this incontrovertible teaching is that whether one believes in a religion or not, whether one believes in survival or not, everyone should practice the moral life.

Buddhist Social Thought:

52. Buddhism recognizes the unity and oneness of the humankind. It rejects the Brahmanical social hierarchy, based on four castes. Among several Buddhist arguments, against caste system, the most persuasive is the biological argument (jatimaya). It goes on to say that different species of life have different biological differences, but not so among human beings:

"Not as regards their hair", says the Buddha, "not as regards their head, ears, mouth, nose, or brows; nor as regards their neck, shoulders, belly, back, hip, breast, anus, or genitals, nor as regards their hands, feet, palms, nails and calves are there any biological (jatimaya) differences between two human beings". (Vasettha Sutta in Majjhimanikaya, and Suttanipata.)

53. The biological argument by Asvaghosa, the Buddhist Sage Poet in his Vajrasuci:

"The doctrine of the four castes is altogether false. All men are of one caste. Wonderful! You affirm that all men proceeded from one, i.e. Brahma the Creator God; how then can there be a fourfold inseparable diversity among them. If I have four sons by one wife, the four sons, having one father and one mother must all be all essentially alike. Know, too, that distinctions of race among beings are broadly marked by differences of conformations and organizations. Thus, the foot of the elephant is very different from that of the horse; that of the tiger unlike that of the deer; and so of the rest, and by that single diagnosis we learn that those animals belong to very different races. But I never heard that the foot of a Ksatriya (a person from the Warrior Caste) is different from that of a Brahmin (a person from the Priestly Caste) or that of a Sudra (a person from the Menial Caste). All men are formed alike, and are clearly of one race" (Quoted from H. H. Wilson, Indian Caste, London, 1877).

54. Those who are "bound by racial prejudices" as well as those who are "bound by caste prejudices", says the Buddha, "have strayed far from the way of salvation". The outcast, as described by the Buddha, is not one who is born in a particular caste, but "one who hardens his heart by virtue of his birth in a particular race, or by virtue of his wealth, or caste, and despises his neighbor".

55. As a religion, Buddhism does not interfere with our ways of living by imposing unnecessary restrictions. We never hear of a Buddhist Dress, Buddhist Food, or Buddhist Medicine, laid down as valid for all times. These are things that change from place to place and from time to time.

56. This is true, when it comes to marriage too. There are many forms of marriage: monogamy, polygamy, polyandry, and so on. Today the legally recognized practice is mostly monogamy. Nevertheless, Buddhism does not say that other forms of marriage are immoral. For Buddhism marriage is only a social institution. It is something entirely mundane, not a religious sacrament. If two married partners are incompatible, they can divorce provided, of course, they follow the laws of the country as enacted for such situations.

57. Buddhism has no prohibitions against birth control. If a married couple decides to practice contraception to prevent children being born, that is entirely their private business. Abortion, of course, is a different matter. It goes against the First Precept. However, we are inclined to believe that abortion can be condoned in cases of serious health hazards, if abortion is the lesser evil. What really matters is the intention, the volition.

58. For the disposal of the dead, certain other religions have conditions, some believe only in burial, not cremation. Some are against the use of coffins. As for Buddhism, no such restrictions: the dead body can be buried or cremated, or used for medical research.

59. When it comes to religious culture, Buddhism could be the most pluralistic. Wherever Buddhism was introduced, it did not level down its cultural diversity to create a mono-culture. Because Buddhism promotes cultural pluralism, it does not become a culture-bound religion. It can go from one place to another, say from Hong Kong to America, leaving behind its cultural paraphernalia.