

THE THREEFOLD SCHEME OF BUDDHIST MENTAL CULTURE

Y. KARUNADASA

Buddhist Psychology identifies three different levels where all our moral evil exists and activates:

- (a) “Latency or underlying tendency” (*anusaya*): this is the level, where our moral evil is “sleeping” (*anuseti*), below the active consciousness.
- (b) “Arising-all-around” (*pariyutthana*): this is the level when what has been “sleeping” is now “awakened”. This refers to the mind’s turbulence in the form of negative emotions and excited feelings.
- (c) “Going beyond” (*vitikkama*): this is the level when what has awakened is now “going beyond”, in the form of vocal and physical actions. (Anusaya Sutta, Anguttaranikaya, Culla-Vedalla Sutta, Majjhimanikaya).

In order to control the three levels of moral evil, Buddhist Ethics refers to three stages of moral development:

- (a) Moral discipline (*sila*): Its purpose is to restrain our moral evil manifesting and externalizing as vocal and physical actions.
- (b) Mental concentration (*samadhi*): Its purpose is to still the mind in turbulence. Although concentration stills the turbulent mind, it cannot remove “the sediments” of moral evil lying below the level of surface-consciousness.

(c) Wisdom (*panna*): Its purpose is to uproot all roots of moral evil which have sunk to the “bottom” of the mind, when the mind becomes still.

The correspondence between the three levels of moral evil and the three stages of moral culture should show how Buddhist Ethics is based on Buddhist Psychology.

Of the three levels of moral evil, the third level is the most dangerous. For, it is the level when our moral evil begins to have a concrete impact on others. It is the level when what is private to us becomes public as well. All forms of false and calumnious speech and all acts of violence and terrorism, national and international wars are instances of moral evil manifesting externally.

Nevertheless, it is the third level that can be easily brought under our control. At first sight this may not appear so. But a little reflection on this matter should convince us that this is really the case. For, we know through experience that it is easier to refrain from committing acts of violence than preventing thoughts of violence from welling up within us. It is of course true that public opinion, social conventions, and laws of the country serve as restraining factors here. Nevertheless, the fact remains that acts of transgression are more easily avoided than thoughts of temptation themselves.

Since the third level is the most dangerous and since it is the easiest to control, the practice of Buddhist moral life begins at the third level.

For Buddhism, the practice of the moral life is a gradual discipline (*anupubba-sikkha*), a gradual course of conduct (*anupubba-*

cariya) and a gradual mode of progress (*anupubba-patipada*). (Anguttaranikaya, Buddha-Jayanti Edition, Vol. V). The practice involves self-transformation from a lower to a higher level. It has a beginning, an intermediate stage, and a consummation.

The threefold scheme of moral training shows that the way to moral perfection is gradual, leading systematically from one step to the next. If moral discipline paves the way to concentration, concentration in turn, paves the way to wisdom. The premise behind this progressive system is that it is only by first disciplining one's vocal and physical acts that one can develop right concentration. While it is only by developing right concentration that one can realize wisdom. That is, the mind's ability to see reality as it is.

The Five Precepts: Why Buddhist morality begins with the observance of the five precepts (*panca sila*) becomes clear when we further examine the threefold scheme of moral training. The five precepts refer to abstaining from depriving a living being of its life, refraining from taking what is not given by others (thievery, robbery, etc.), sexual misconduct or illicit sexual relations, false speech, and taking intoxicating beverages which impair our diligence and vigilance. These are five moral transgressions at the "going beyond" level that have the most detrimental impact on the social environment. It is obvious that the five transgressions do not represent all moral violations at the third level. However, since they constitute five of the most dangerous, abstaining from them is considered as the very beginning of the moral life.

There are two Buddhist approaches to mental culture. One is *samatha* and the other *vipassana*. *Samatha* was practised by pre-Buddhist Brahmanical schools of meditation as well. On the other

hand, *vipassana* is the unique discovery of the Buddha. The practice of *vipassana* meditation corresponds to *panna* (wisdom) in the threefold scheme of Buddhist mental culture.

In a general sense, *samatha* means the unification of the mind that usually remains differentiated. In a technical sense, *samatha* means one-pointed-ness of mind (*cittassa ekaggata*), which is experienced at the higher reaches of mind in the ascending levels of *Jhanic* experience. In pre-Buddhist meditative practice, *samatha* was considered as an end in itself, as the goal of religious life. However, according to the Buddha, *samatha* meditation is only a means to an end, the end being the realization of wisdom.

From the Buddhist perspective, exclusive emphasis on *samatha* meditation can have many dangers. One such danger is the possibility of wrongly interpreting such meditative experience in the light of theological and metaphysical speculations. It is, in fact, misinterpreted meditative experience that becomes a fertile ground for the emergence of beliefs and ideas relating to self, soul, Cosmic Soul, God, God-head, or any other form of metaphysical entity. (Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*).

Vipassana-meditation: The term *vipassana* means “seeing clearly” or “seeing accurately” (*vi + passati*, to see). What does it see? What is the content or object of the “seeing”? The answer to this question comes from the Buddha’s definition of higher knowledge/insight. To the question raised by the Buddha, “what, monks, are the things that should be thoroughly comprehended through higher knowledge/insight”, the Buddha himself provides the answer: “It is the five aggregates of grasping, so should the question be answered”. (Samyuttanikaya, PTS, III, 83-84).

The five aggregates of grasping are corporeality (*rupa*), feelings (*vedana*), perceptions (*sanna*), volitional constructions (*sankhara*), and consciousness (*vinnana*). It is these five aggregates of grasping that constitute the whole of the phenomenology of experience. Therefore, according to Buddhism, the highest insight is not the knowledge of some kind of transcendental reality, as for instance, the Cosmic Soul of the pre-Buddhist Upanisadic thought. Rather, it is the final awakening to the actual nature of the world of phenomenal existence.

The Three Characteristics of Phenomenal Existence

From the Buddhist perspective, impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and selflessness (*anatta*) characterize the actual nature of phenomenal existence, in other words, the five aggregates of grasping. Therefore, *vipassana* or insight meditation is the direct meditative perception of phenomena in terms of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and non-self.

Impermanence in itself is not a problem. It becomes a problem when we see it as permanence. This is what is called “perception of permanence in impermanence” (*anicce nicca-sanna*). Likewise, non-self is not a problem in itself. It becomes a problem when we see it as self. This is what is called “perception of self in what is not self” (*anatte atta-sanna*) (Anguttaranikaya, PTS, 52; Nettippakarana, PTS, p.85).

Accordingly, what prevents our achieving freedom through insight meditation is not the nature of actuality, but our unwarranted assumptions on the nature of actuality. What comes to an end, when Nibbana is realized, is not the world. Rather, it is a wrong interpretation of the world.

For Buddhism what actually matters is not the nature of the world as it is, but the nature of the world, as interpreted and constructed through the lens of our ego-centric perspectives: our views and beliefs and our dogmatic assertions on the nature of reality.

In concluding this essay, we would like to raise one pertinent question.

What is more important: To View, or To Have a View?

The answer to this question is found in a dialogue between the Buddha and Vacchagotta, an itinerant philosopher, who was very much prone to speculative views. One day Vacchagotta came to the Buddha and asked: “Venerable Good Gotama, do you have a view of your own?” Then the Buddha replied: “The Tathagata, O Vaccha, has given up all views (*ditthi*). However, the Tathagata has viewed (*dittham*) thus: this is [clinging to] materiality, this is how it arises, and this is how it ceases; this is [clinging to] feeling, to perception, to volitional constructions, and to consciousness, this is how it arises and this is how it ceases”. (Majjhimanikaya, PTS, I 487).

As a matter of fact, *vipassana* means “seeing clearly”, without judging, editing, interpreting, rationalizing, and justifying what comes to be observed. All forms of judging, editing, etc. involve grasping and clinging.

“For one, who is clinging, there is agitation; for one who has no clinging, there is no agitation. When there is no agitation, there is calm; when there is calm, there is no attachment; when there is no attachment, there is no coming-and-going; when there is no coming-and-going, there is no disappearance and reappearance; when there is no disappearance and reappearance, there is

neither here nor there, nor in-between. This indeed is the end of suffering.” (Samyuttanikaya, Buddha Jayanti Edition, VI, 130).