

## **Buddhist Ethics for a Meaningful Life**

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**Abstract**

*In Buddhist system primary importance has been attached on character building as well as moral values. The state of liberation is such a step which can be treated as mystical because nobody knows what it is. It is rather important to become morally perfect being so that the society would be peaceful. Thus in Buddhism maximum emphasis has been attached on ethics and ethical living in various ways. The stages of shila and Samadhi are bright examples of it. The Buddhist concept of Brahmavihara is very much important as a phase in course of the meditation or Samadhi. It includes the following four steps which are ethically very much significant. Those are: (a) Universal friendship (metta) (b) Universal pity (karuna) (c) Happiness of all (mudita) (d) Indifference to worldly relations (upekkha) )*

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## **Introduction**

Both in the Buddhist and Jaina traditions the emphasis has been attached on character building before aspiring the higher goals. In the Buddhist literatures it is strictly maintained that if a higher goal like liberation, (*nibbana*) is aimed then it is necessary to obtain right knowledge (Wisdom or *Prajna*) by following a disciplined moral life undergoing the stages of *Sila* and *Samadhi*.

The ethical practices recommended in the Buddhist system resemble with the Jaina ethical tradition. The moral principles in Buddhist tradition are known as *Pancashila* and in Jaina tradition known as *Pancavratas*. In Jaina tradition there are two types of *vratas*, namely, *anuvratas* and *mahavratas*, are recommended to house-hold people and the monks respectively for disciplined life. Very much like the *triratnas* of Jainism there are three basic needs of Buddhism which are: *Shila*, *Samadhi* and *Prajna*. The first two steps are essential for the third step.

## **Principles of *Pancashila***

The primary concern of Buddhist philosopher was to get nirvana or liberation. In order to proceed towards liberation they have to follow noble paths. In Buddhist tradition three important paths are recommended. Those are namely, four noble truth, eightfold path and adhering to *Shila*.

*Panca shila* happens to be the five principles for maintaining a self-restrained life. It is the character building of man. The five principles recommended for self-restrained life are as follows: non-killing and non-harming to other living beings, non-stealing, control over sex, truth speaking or non-lying, and no use of intoxicants or alcohols. These five principles are essential to bring concentration in mind and following up a disciplined life.

After having a disciplined life following the above five principles the monks are to follow another five principles in the following manner. 1. To consume one simple meal a day. 2. To avoid any kind of entertainment. 3. To avoid self-adornment. 4. To use simple bed to sleep and seat. 5. To avoid to use wealth. These are the principles recommended to the monks to follow strictly a disciplined life.

## **Brahmavihara**

This Buddhist concept of *Brahmavihara* is very much important as a phase in course of the meditation or *Samadhi*. Both *Sila* and *Samadhi* are highly needed to remove the tangles of desires that are found to be intertwined the being outside and inside. *Sila* makes some one disciplined and *Samadhi* brings concentration. These two principles together lead to wisdom. The concept of *Brahmavihara* may lead to some confusion in the manner that Buddhists have been influenced by Upanisadic

concepts of Brahman to arrive at the notion of *Brahmavihara*. The confusion might come from the translation of the 40<sup>th</sup> sutra of *Suhrillekha* of Nagarjuna given by Wenzel in the following manner: “Always perfectly meditate on (turn your thoughts to) kindness, pity, joy and indifference; then if you do not obtain a higher degree you (certainly) will obtain the happiness of the Brahman world.”<sup>1</sup> But it is important to note that the concept of *Brahma* (from *Brabmavihara*) in no way resembles with the Upanisadic notion of Brahman. There has been no such picture thinking that mind contains a sheet or abode of Brahma which has been named as *Brahmavihara*. As such the concept of *Brahmavihara* is an ethical concept whereas the Upanisadic concept of Brahman is purely an ontological concept.

Buddhists have maintained that *Samadhi* is a necessary condition for Wisdom (*Panna*). In order to have *Samadhi* (concentration) there is the necessity of the preparations or *upacaras*. The *Samadhi* leads to the highest state of liberation that is *Nibbana*. *Samadhi* starts with the process of self-purification. The sage, interested to start with *upacaras* needs to reach at the first step known as first *Jhana* where his mind will be away from the influences of his body. In order to have first *jhana* one has to go to cremation ground and realize the horrible conditions of the dead body (car case). The body of the being to which man tries to beautify as better as possible undergoes very nauseating conditions just after the death. So the body is not important for a being for obtaining higher knowledge. So detachment of attaching importance to body (*kayagata sati*) becomes the first phase of *upacara* for *Samadhi*.

In the next step there is the necessity of a quiet place, where the sage can practice the control over his breathing process. This helps to fix the mind on the process of breathing. It is known as *anapanasati*.

After these two *upacaras* of *kayagatasati* and *anapanasati*, the next step is *Brahmavihar*. *Brahmavihar* constitutes four-fold meditations. Those are, namely: (a) Universal friendship (*metta*) (b) Universal pity (*karuna*) (c) Happiness of all (*mudita*) (d) Indifference to worldly relations (*upekkha*)

**(a) Universal friendship (metta)**

In order to achieve this state one has to feel that he should become impartial for his friends and enemies. He should try to forget his own miseries and remain happy and cheerful. At the same time he should also try to see that all people around him are also trying to forget their miseries and living with happiness. He should not make distinction between his friends and enemies. All should become happy should be his chief consideration. He should not become angry with any other person. He should think that if his anger affects others, he has no perfection over *silas*. In case

of any injury caused by someone upon some other person, the injury is due to joint responsibilities. So there is no need of taking further revenge in causing further injuries. So anger should be controlled for universal friendship. Anger can only bring mischief and resulted in bad deeds. The universal friendship is possible by making the mind free from anger. This is called *metta bhavana*.

**(b) Universal pity (karuna)**

If universal friendship could be possible then universal pity becomes easier. To show sympathy in case of sorrow, without thinking about whether he is friend or enemy, will lead to universal pity. The Sage should also feel pity towards those who lead apparently happy life. It is because they are not proceeding in the path of *nibbana*. So out of pity the sage should try to show the right path.

**(c) Happiness of all (mudita)**

This condition follows from the first step of universal friendship. When universal friendship has to be practiced the happiness of all has also to be taken care of. The sage undergoing for meditation should look after the happiness of all. It is because for him, his own happiness is neither important nor unimportant.

**(d) Indifference towards enjoyment (upekkha)**

At this stage the sage is neither pleased nor displeased by an object. He has to develop the attitude of indifference. By that he can remain away from greediness and move towards renunciation. There are two important characteristics of this stage. One is the attitude towards *sukha* and the other is *ekaggata*. Mind should be concentrated to that extent that it will be indifferent towards the highest happiness (*sukha*). The state of absolute indifference has to be aimed at where both *dukkha* and *sukha* are vanished and that will lead to final perfection.

It shows that all the four stages of *Brahmavihara* are ethically very significant. In Buddhist system primary importance has been attached on character building as well as moral values. The state of liberation is such a step which can be treated as mystical because nobody knows what it is. It is rather important to become morally perfect being so that the society would be peaceful. Thus in Buddhism maximum emphasis has been attached on ethics and ethical living in various ways. The stages of *shila* and *samadhi* are bright examples of it.

Reference:

- 1 Dasgupta, S.N., 1988, *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass, Vol.I., p.144