

## Criteria Used for Evaluating Concepts of Good and Bad

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In making decisions as to what is good and what is bad one has to bear in mind that there are no commonly accepted principles on which to base criteria. There seem to be many criteria but no one principle on which to base them. It can be understood that the teaching on *kusala-akusala* and *puñña-pāpa* belong to Buddhist fundamental ethical teachings. These teachings interpret what is good and bad from an ethical point of view but the purpose of this article is to examine criteria used for evaluating concepts of good and bad. The ethical teaching regarding *kusala-akusala*, is the unique teaching of Buddhist philosophy.

What factors must be taken into account when evaluating what is good and what is bad from the spiritual or ethical point of view? There are two factors that influence such decisions: the environment and the individual. Yet teachers have pointed out that people commonly accept feelings when taking into account the motivating factors underling behavior. It is difficult to categorically state what is good and what is bad from a religious point of views because religions will differ about their views. When taking a decision on what ethical principles one should adopt, one has to think with one's critical faculties and the evidence of one's own gut-feelings on the matter.

In the Buddhist philosophy when investigating what is good and what is bad many descriptive words are used such as the following:

Kaṇha – Sukka	black and white
Sāvajja – anavajja	wrong and right (not wrong)
Sukaṭa – dukkaṭa	what was done correctly and not correctly
Sucarita – ducarita	good behavior and bad behavior
Puñña – papa	merit and demerit
Kalyāṇa - pāpaka	Good and bad
Sevitabba – asevitabba	ought and ought not
Bhabba – abhabba	suitable and not suitable

In the Buddhist philosophy intention figures prominently as a deciding factor in determining what is good and bad action. Therefore, when doing an action one has to consider carefully what is good and what is

bad and make a judgment on that. In evaluating actions it is the intention that is considered.<sup>1</sup> The individual's responsibility is essential in doing an action. He cannot free himself from this responsibility. If he cannot accept responsibility for what he does he should not do that action. One is the owner of one's action, one is the heir of one's actions, one's action comes from one's womb, is like one's relative or one's refuge. Both men and women have to keep this in mind always.<sup>2</sup> All actions come under the sway of the mind and this should come to the forefront of all actions. All good and bad actions have mind as their chief.

The Buddha has given several criteria for evaluating good and bad. The Kālāma-sutta of the Anguttara-nikāya has given a measure to evaluate good and bad action. In this sutta many people came and complained to the Buddha how various teachers would give them different teachings, so much so that they are unable to decide which teaching to accept. The Buddha told them to put aside everything that teachers have told them and gave them certain criteria with which they can evaluate according to their own heart-felt feelings.

"It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumor; nor upon what is in the scriptures; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, 'The monk is our teacher.' Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise and when undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill,' abandon them."<sup>3</sup>

He rejected the above ten criteria that are not useful and presented two criteria that could be used in this analysis. He said what is censured by the wise is not good. Also when an action is followed that is not beneficial to one and others and will cause suffering to one and others, then that action is to be regarded as wrong. If this simple rule is comprehended, then one should reject that course of action.

On the contrary, if wise people say such a course of action is good, and it has beneficial result on one and others for a long time, gives contentment for long time, then one should follow that course of action.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, the Buddha said that when a person has greed, hatred and ignorance, it will not allow one to take the correct course of action. Then what happens is that defilements will control and manipulate that person. Such a person does wrong actions as well as causes others to do wrong. This must be well understood by one and one should not follow what one has understood as what is wrong. This teaching cannot be compared with other religions because it is so very unique and special. It is so universal that it can be applied by any other religion.

<sup>1</sup> Dha. (ed) Suriyagoda Sumangala Thera. London: Pali Text Society. 1914.

<sup>2</sup> AN. *Abhiñhapaccavekkaṇa-sutta*. CSCD.

<sup>3</sup> "Iti kho, kālāmā, yaṃ taṃ avocumhā 'etha tumhe, kālāmā! Mā anussavena, mā paramparāya, mā itikirāya, mā piṭakasampadānena, mā takkaḥetu, mā nayahetu, mā ākāraparivitakkena, mā diṭṭhinijjhānakkantiyā, mā bhabbarūpatāya, mā samaṇo no garūti. Yadā tumhe kālāmā attanāva jāneyyātha – 'ime dhammā akusalā, ime dhammā sāvajjā, ime dhammā viññugarahitā, ime dhammā samattā samādinā ahitāya dukkhāya saṃvattantīti, atha tumhe, kālāmā, pajaheyyāthā'ti, iti yaṃ taṃ vuttaṃ, idametam paṭicca vuttaṃ.

AN III. *Kālāma-sutta*. (ed) Rev. Richard Morris. London: Pali Text Society. 1961. 188p.

<sup>4</sup> AN III. *Kālāma-sutta*. ..do.. 188p.

When deciding what is good and bad one should decide with a mind that is perfectly clear and calm. It is only then that one can see what is good and what is bad. And in making the judgment whether a certain course of action is good or bad one must consider the result of such action, whether there is happiness or unhappiness at the end. It is on one's own authority that the judgment is taken. It is not something imposed by an outside authority.

In the *Ambalaṭṭikārahulovāda –sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* the Buddha gave Ven. Rahula certain criteria for evaluating good and bad action.<sup>5</sup> This clarifies what a father should do for a child. He advises Rahula to reflect carefully on what he wants to do through body, speech and mind. The word “reflect” (*paccavekkha*) has the deep meaning of considering wisely, not merely pondering. It means to reflect on the root cause that motivates one to do such and such an action and also its repercussions to one and others. The criterion is if it will lead to bad effects on one and others, then reject that course of action. Those are bad evil actions. They increase suffering. This type of action should not be undertaken. One who is concerned about one's progress not only spiritually but materially also, one should not follow such courses of action. In the same way if the action contemplated on has the effect of bringing for oneself benefits and benefits for others also, then one should follow that course of action. Those are good (*kusala*) action because it increases happiness and it brings good results. The person who does this type of action experiences contentment, joy and ease of mind.

From these teachings of the Buddha, we can identify several factors.

1. When evaluating good and bad, reflection is given first place.
2. One also gives first place to actions that results for the welfare of one and others.
3. The result should reflect balance in effects. e.g. If one follows this course of action bad

will occur to one and others, if we do not follow this course of action bad will not result.

The teaching also points out that one should not think of the immediate good effect but the long term effect.

One should base oneself on, and, use as a support the experiences of others. One has to consider that not only one who does violence and harm to others but those who cause others to do harm will also fall into the category of doing harm.

One should reflect before engaging in an action at the beginning, in the middle and at the end regarding its effects on one and others. That is what is called ethical evaluation in Buddhism.

In the *Bāhitika-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the Buddha has presented an intelligent criterion for evaluating good and bad. King Pasenadi Kosala asks Ven. Ananda what are actions that earn the censure of intelligent people. Ven. Ananda replies that intelligent people censure bad evil actions. They cause suffering, cause psychological grief and are wrong, result is general suffering. Bad effects come not only to the one who does wrong action but the one who causes another to do wrong action.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> MN I. *Ambalaṭṭikārahulovāda –sutta*. (ed) V. Trenckner. London: Pali Text Society. 1948. 414p.

<sup>6</sup> MN II. *Bāhitika –sutta*. London: Pali Text Society. 1951. 112p.

There are criteria mentioned in the Āṅguttara-nikāya.

1. One who centres his actions thinking of the effects on himself and others.
2. One who centres his actions on the teaching.
3. One who centres his actions on society.<sup>7</sup>

In the Dhammapada the Buddha has explained criteria for evaluating good and bad by using certain similes and metaphors. Hatred is, indeed, never appeased by hatred in this world. It is appeased only by loving-kindness. This is an ancient law.<sup>8</sup> Here he grieves, hereafter he grieves; the evil-doer grieves in both existences. He grieves and he suffers anguish when he sees the depravity of his own deeds.<sup>9</sup> That deed is well done if one does not have to repent for having done it, and if one is delightful and happy with the result of that deed.<sup>10</sup>

That deed is not well done, if one has to repent for having done it, and if, with a tearful face, one has to weep as a result of that deed.<sup>11</sup> All are afraid of the stick, all fear death. Putting oneself in another's place, one should not beat or kill others<sup>12</sup> All are afraid of the stick, all hold their lives dear. Putting oneself in another's place, one should not beat or kill others.<sup>13</sup> He who seeks his own happiness by oppressing others, who also desire to have happiness, will not find happiness in his next existence.<sup>14</sup> He who seeks his own happiness by not oppressing others, who also desire to have happiness, will find happiness in his next existence.<sup>15</sup>

The Buddha gives preference to the first in the Veludvāra-sutta people say “we like to live long. We like to experience happiness. We dislike suffering. Like us other also like to live long and experience happiness and dislike suffering.” When thinking in this way, one separates oneself from evil and prevents others from experiencing evil effects and states what is good for oneself and others.

The goal of Buddhist ethics is nibbāna. Then by keeping in mind the goal of nibbāna one should decide what leads one there. Nibbāna is what is not greed, hatred and ignorance. Without one taking a decision based on the long term effects on one and others, we cannot take a right decision.

<sup>7</sup> ĀN.I. Adhipateyya –sutta. London: Pali Text Society. 1948. 147p.

<sup>8</sup> *Na hi verena verani - sammantidha kudacanam averena ca sammanti - esa dhammo sanantano*. Verse 5: KN. Dha. London: PTS. 1914. 2p

<sup>9</sup> *Idha socati pecca socati - papakari ubhayattha socati so socati so vihannati - disva kammakilīthamattano*. Verse 15: KN. Dha. 3p.

<sup>10</sup> *Na tam kammam katam sadhu - yam katva anutappati yassa assumukho rodam - vipakam patisevati*. Verse 67: KN. Dha. 6p.

<sup>11</sup> *Tanca kammam katam sadhu - yam katva nanutappati yassa patito sumano - vipikam patisevati*. Verse 68: Dha. 6p.

<sup>12</sup> *Sabbe tasanti dandassa - sabbe bhayanti maccuno attanam upamam katva - na haneyya na ghataye*. (Verse 129) Dha. 19p.

<sup>13</sup> *Sabbe tasanti dandassa - sabbesam jivitam piyam attanam upamam katva - na haneyya na ghataye*. (Verse 130) ..do..

<sup>14</sup> *Sukhakamani bhutani -yo dandena vihimsati attano sukhamesano - pecca so na labhate sukham*. Verse 131: ..do..

<sup>15</sup> *Sukhakamani bhutani - yo dandena na himsati attano sukhamesano - pecca so labbate sukhatm*. Verse 132: ..do..

This Buddhist criteria is centred on humanity and is something that can be accepted by all religions and people all over the world as an universal ethic. The criteria must be in the hearts of people all the time and one must take upon oneself to make those decision on one's own authority.

### Abbreviations

AN	Aṅguttara-nikāya
MN	Majjhima-nikāya
KN	Khuddaka-nikāya
CSCD	<u>Catta Sangayana</u> CD Rom.

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