

## Zen Ly-Tran Contributes to Social Morality of Vietnamese

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*The leader of the country with devotion and understanding the value of spiritual morality is sure that the country will develop. Morality is the basic foundation for all good deeds.*

*Moral is one of the most important areas of philosophy which is studied and analysed not only in science but also in religion. For example in primary, high school, and even in the university they study ethics. We also studied ethics in our daily life from the examples of national heroes or the renowned personalities of the world.*

*The value and benefit of ethics can help one to have good relations between the members of society. The aim of secular ethics is to teach us how to live, work and treat others in the best way. The aim of religious ethics is to help us become not only a good man in this life but also attain holiness in the present life and the future one. In the Dharmapada verse 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>, the Buddha teaches:*

*Here he suffers; after death he suffers: the evildoer suffers in both places. He suffers; he is afflicted, seeing the impurity of his own past deeds. Here he rejoices; after death he rejoices: he that has done good works rejoices in both places. He rejoices, he rejoices exceedingly, seeing the purity of his own past deeds.<sup>i</sup>*

*In this article, it will explain the Buddhist moral value of Ly-Tran Dynasty contributed to the lives of Vietnamese people.*

Ethics is very important in any religious teaching. Each religious teaching has its own ethical theory which stresses the importance of ethics for attaining the final goal.

### The meaning of Ethics

There are many definitions of ethics:

Ethics, the term is derived from the Ancient Greek ethos, where it may fairly be said that systematic thinking about ethics as a form of practical reason began. Ethics and morality are often used as interchangeable terms, although ethics is strictly the reflection upon morality.<sup>ii</sup>

The term “ethics” is used in three different but related ways:

1. A general pattern or “way of life”,
2. A set of rules of conduct or “moral code”,
3. An inquiry about ways of life and rules of conduct.

In the first sense we speak of Buddhist or Christian ethics; in the second, we speak of professional ethics and of unethical behaviour. In the third sense, ethics is a branch of philosophy that is

frequently given the special name of Meta ethics.<sup>iii</sup>

According to John S. Mackenzie ethics discusses man's habits and customs, their characters and principles on which they habitually act, and consider what it is that constitutes the rightness and wrongness of those principles, the good or the evil of those habits".<sup>iv</sup>

The meaning of ethics may be rendered as the way of happiness and good deeds as discussed by philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.<sup>v</sup> All of these philosophers accepted that ethics is a right action, just law and the virtuous character of living beings as the good in the society. "All three philosophers agree in identifying individual good with social good and in identifying moral concepts such as justice and virtue in terms of the achievement of good".<sup>vi</sup>

These are some meanings of ethics in the field of philosophy and religion. These meanings are accepted as fundamental and any study of ethics has to take them as starting point. In Buddhism, there are some problems regarding the conception of ethics. According to Buddhism, "There is no Buddhist term which exactly corresponds to 'ethics' as a branch of philosophy concerned with the analysis and evaluation of conduct in the way the subject is classified in the west"<sup>vii</sup>. And there is no word in Buddhist terminology that directly translates into English as ethics; the closest term is *silā* (moral

discipline). *Silā* is one of the threefold discipline, along with *prajñā* (wisdom) and mental cultivation (*samādhi*) which constitute the path leading to the end of suffering.<sup>viii</sup>

Thus, *Silā* is a means depend on which individual human being can progress in religious life. So, this *silā* can be divided into five precepts, eight precepts up to over two hundred precepts for lay people, monks and nuns. On the other hand, there is one term which contains the true meanings of ethics. It is Dharma. Many scholars accept Dharma as the core of Buddhist teachings and regard it as law, moral and doctrine. As Edward J. Thomas says:

*Doctrine here is dharma. In the pre-Buddhistic use dharma is conceived as a prescribed course of action for anything in nature which may follow a natural or moral process. It may thus be translated "law". As applied to theories of human action it was much wider than morality, for it included all ritual, and was thus practically religion. The dharma of the Buddha consisted in teaching the true doctrine of man's beliefs and actions, and this exists in the Buddha's word, the Doctrine. Another distinct use of the word is in the sense of thing or object, especially objects of mind, thoughts, or ideas.*<sup>ix</sup>

In Buddhism, ethics is a practical value of one's action, even a thought which can help one to be happy. Depending on three actions one can

become a holy man or an ordinary man. The meaning of ethics and its value is defined on the basis of historical events, local customs or the conduct of respected men. In religion, ethics taught by the founder of each religion is recognized as standard that should be emulated by the followers of each religion. In case of Buddhism, ethics was taught by the Buddha after his enlightenment.

In *Dharmapada* many verses deal with ethics. For example in verses 183, the Buddha teaches:

*Not to do evil,  
To cultivate merit,  
To purify one's mind.  
This is the teachings of the Buddha.<sup>x</sup>*

In this verse, the first half sets the standard of human relations. In the later half, assisted by mental purification and consummated by the belief in the teaching of all the Buddhas, the belief which shall finally realize the communion of the enlightenment.

According to Buddhism, ethics circumscribes all actions of a person in his daily life. Shunning all evil we can purify our actions; not only the actions of body but also of speech and thought. This is the basic teaching and the main message of Buddhism to human beings. Developing this idea, the Buddha teaches the good way of life:

*For many let the good man wealth pursue,*

*Him-Dharma-warded doth a deva ward.*

*For him well taught, moral and dutiful,*

*Will honour never wane? On Dharma standing,*

*Virtuous, truth-speaking,  
conscientious,*

*Of such a man who's fit to appraise the worth?*

*This even like red gold from Jab's stream.*

*Him devas praise, by Brahmā praised is he.<sup>xi</sup>*

We can see that our actions in daily life are a cycle repeated habits; if we can control them for the betterment <sup>xiii</sup> of our life we can attain the stage of freedom in this life. On the contrary, we can get the opposite results of our actions and be called an evil man by the society. According to Buddhism, the best way of life boils down to the following ten good actions:

1. Abstention from taking life.
2. Abstention from taking what has not been given.
3. Abstention from sexual misconduct.
4. Abstention from lying.
5. Abstention from slanderous speech.
6. Abstention from harsh speech
7. Abstention from idle talk

8. Non-covetousness
9. Non-malevolence.
10. Right view<sup>xiii</sup>

These ten good actions are the primary practice not only for layman but also for monks and nuns. Like the house which needs a good foundation to remain for long time so are living beings; they need a good conduct to function successfully. These ten good actions are described as the basic principle to maintain the house and the main cause of becoming good living beings in the society. In our daily life these ten actions are with us at every moment, and they are divided into three groups. These three groups are body, speech, and mind.

Items 1-3 relate to bodily acts, while items 4-7 related to speech acts. The final supplementary group of three related to mental attitudes and is synonymous with the Cardinal Virtues.<sup>xiv</sup>

From this above classification of the ten good actions we can see that the meaning of ethics in Buddhism is a way of thinking, speaking, and acting.

Ethics in Buddhism is not only influenced by the Sangha but has strong influenced on the life of human beings in general. Because of its important role in the Sangha and in the society, it is described as the acme of evolution of human beings.

Though explanation of the role of morality, we see that under Ly-Tran Dynasty, Vietnamese people have a peaceful life. Because, under the leadership of the Kings are Buddhists. Buddhism is the moral foundation for the political system at that time. People have faith deeply in cause and effect. Therefore, it can be said that the period of Ly-Tran was the golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism and it was also the period brought happiness and prosperity to Vietnamese.

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<sup>i</sup> Daw Mya Tin (tr.) *The Dharmapada*, Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1990, pp. 6-7.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul A.B. Clarke & Andrew Linzey, *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology, and Society*, London: Routledge Publishing, 1992, p. 307.

<sup>iii</sup> Paul Edwards (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, USA: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972, Vol. III, p. 81.

<sup>iv</sup> Edward J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004, p. 13.

<sup>v</sup> Paul Edwards (ed.) *Op. Cit.*, p.82.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>vii</sup> Damien Keown, *Dictionary of Buddhism*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 88.

<sup>viii</sup> Robert E. Buswell, Jr (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, USA: Thomson Press, 2004, Vol. I, p. 261.

<sup>ix</sup> Edward J. Thomas, *Op. Cit.*, p.13.

<sup>x</sup> Daw Mya Tin (tr.) *The Dharmapada*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>xi</sup> E.M. Hare (tr.) *Op. Cit.*, Vol. III, p.39.

<sup>xii</sup> For the happiness of oneself and others.

<sup>xiii</sup> Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>xiv</sup> From Wikipedia Encyclopedia: Four Cardinal Virtues (Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Courage).