

ETHICS OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTA AND EARLY BUDDHISM - AN OVERVIEW

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Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Early Buddhism and the Bhagavat Gīta are noted in the history of Indian thought for their ethical doctrines and severely practical outlook. With a view to enabling man to secure the supreme goal of life, both of them draw attention to the unsatisfactory nature of mundane existence and exhort people to seek deliverance from it. Considering Nirvāṇa as the highest goal of life, they suggest practical ways and means of attaining it. Nirvāṇa being the ultimate goal of ethics, the ethical ideas of both the Bhagavat Gīta and Buddhism are shaped in accordance with their respective concepts of it.

The Buddhist approach to Nirvāṇa is thoroughly empirical having no element of metaphysics or theology associated with it. Buddha, therefore, prefers to call it the state of the extinction of suffering and refrains from any speculative description of it. But the Bhagavat Gita looks upon it from a metaphysical and theological standpoint and speaks of it as a state of the fulfillment of the self, dwelling in Brahman, union with or merging in God. This difference in attitude is, naturally, reflected in their approach to the problems of ethics. Thus, notwithstanding some of their common ideas, they view the problems of ethics in different perspectives.

Buddha analysed every aspect of experience with its inner and outer dimensions and arrived at the conclusion that it is all impermanent (aniccam) sorrowful (dukkham) and soulless (anāṭṭa). This conviction

constitutes the basic teachings of Buddhism which controls the entire Buddhist view of life. With the realization of this fundamental fact of experience one is said to be possessed of the right view (Samyak dr̥ṣṭi) which marks the beginning of the holy life, and is described as the first step of the Eightfold Path to Nirvana. Thus, it is the right view or the proper realization of the transient character of worldly existence which constitutes the basis of Buddhist ethics.

Buddha, without recourse to any metaphysical or theological presupposition, on the basis of purely empirical analysis shows how the suffering of mundane life follows from the transient nature of worldly objects and how through proper self-control and discipline in the light of right understanding, the final release from suffering can be attained. Buddha points out that since both the objects and the sense organs are transitory, the feelings produced by their contact are also transitory or ever-lapsing¹. One can not feel secure with any object of sense and this insecurity is an unmistakable mark of suffering. Thus, the fact of suffering follows from the impermanent nature of worldly things. But if one is ignorant of this fundamental fact of experience, one drifts towards the evil course of life, since ignorance is the root of all evil things².

Thus according to Buddhism, the belief in anything as permanent, blissful and the self has to be reckoned as a wrong view. The right view thus does not consist in the knowledge of any metaphysical or theological principle, but in the correct appraisal of the fundamental facts of our experience. Explaining the nature of right view, Buddha says "when, friends, the noble disciple understands unrighteous action and the root of righteous action, righteous action and the root of righteous action, then he is possessed of the right view"³. Expounding the nature of righteous and unrighteous actions and their respective roots, it is observed that greed (lobha), hatred (doṣa) and delusion (moha) are

the roots of all unrighteous actions and their opposites are the roots of righteous actions. An examination into the classification and the criteria of righteous and unrighteous actions which belong to the physical, mental and verbal domains, reveal that the ethical code of Buddhism is based on an empirical analysis of the nature of things and not on extraneous sanctions from any other authority of God, Tradition etc. The natural law of Karma operating universally and independently is considered as sufficient to explain the fact of moral retribution in the universe. Thus the ethics of Buddhism is essentially autonomous in character and can not be reduced to any form of Intuitionism. The renowned Buddhist scholar S. Thachibana opines that - the Buddhist morality... is in its foundation autonomous⁴. The answers of Buddha to the metaphysical questions raised by Malukyaputta⁵ and Udayi⁶ reveals that the Raison detre of Buddhist ethics is nothing but the fundamental fact of mundane experience. It does not base itself on any metaphysical speculation or a priori theorization.

Bhagavat Gīta on the other hand, derives its ethics chiefly from its metaphysical and theological views, though some obvious empirical facts pointed out in Buddhism are also incorporated in it. In an almost Buddhistic manner, it speaks of the impermanence of worldly objects and considers all feelings resulting from the sense - object contact as sources of suffering⁷. Accordingly, it also, like Buddhism, imparts the teaching of detachment from all pains and pleasures of mundane life. But, unlike Buddhism, it does not deduce the doctrine of anatta (soullessness) from the facts of impermanence and suffering. On the other hand, it continues to assert the metaphysical doctrine of the self, which more than anything else, provides the basis for its ethical code. A look into the Bhagavat Gīta vividly reveals this fact.

Though Bhagavat Gīta, like Buddhism, arrives at the fact of worldly suffering from the impermanence of worldly objects, it parts company with Buddhism in respect of the characteristic of soullessness. It is here on this crucial point that it gives up the empirical approach and harks back to the traditional metaphysical notion of the self. The concept of the self is of pivotal importance in the Bhagavat Gīta, and, indeed, its entire metaphysical and theological speculations rest on it. Metaphysically the self is considered as identical with the supreme reality or Brahman⁸ and theologically it is spoken of as the manifestation of God⁹. Accordingly, the supreme goal of man is said to consist in realizing the essential identity of the atman with Brahman¹⁰ or in seeking union with Ívara or God¹¹. It is to this metaphysical or theological and that all ethical efforts and disciplines are to be directed. Thus, theology end metaphysics are made the fundamental basis of ethics in the Bhagavat Gīta in contra - distinciton to its purely empirical basis in Early Buddhism.

References

1. Samyukta Nikāya III. 225-8; IV. 67-69.
2. Ye keci akusala dhamma Sabhe te avijjamulaka Samyukta Nikaya II. 263.
3. Yato kho avuso ariyasavako akusalam... akusalamulaum--- kusalam kusalamulanca pajanati ettavata pi kho..... sammaditthi hoti, Majjhima Nikāya. I, 46-47.
4. "The Ethics of Buddhism" preface by Prof. Wijesekera, pp. viii-ix.
5. Majjhima Nikaya I 427 - 430.
6. Majjhima Nikāya. 430.

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7. Bhagavat Gīta (BG) II. 14.
 8. BG. XIII. 2, 17, 22; XV. 15.
 9. BG. X. 20; XIII. 27; XV. 7; XVIII. 61.
 10. BG IV. 35; V. 20, 24; XIII. 20.
 11. BG. IV.9, VII. 23; VIII. 7, 8; IX 34; XI. 55; XII.8; XVIII 65, 68.

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