

Foundation of Ethics and Practice in *Amitābha* Cult: Modern Social Perspective

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Abstract: Ethics is one of the most important areas of philosophy which is studied and analyzed not only in science but also in religion. The value and benefit of ethics can help one to have good relation 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 time, and the future one.

Therefore, ethics is very important in any religious teaching. Each religious teaching has its own ethical theory which stresses the important of ethics for attaining the final goal. In this paper, I will discuss about the Buddhist ethical theory and its practical application in the *Amitābha* Cult.

Keywords: *Amitābha*, Ethics, Buddhism, Society.

Introduction

Pure Land Buddhism as a school of Buddhist thinking began in India around the 2nd century B.C., and continued to grow rapidly. We find ample evidences of Pure Land Teachings in numerous works, both *sūtra* and *śāstras*, such as the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra*, the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, the *Daśabhūmika śāstras* attributed by Nāgārjuna, or the *Ratnagotravibhāga* of Sthiramati. Afterward, Pure Land Buddhism spread to China where there was strong cult of *Amitābha* by 2nd century C.E., and then spread to Japan around the 6th century C.E. Pure Land Buddhism is also a branch of main-stream Mahāyāna Buddhism and one of the most popular schools in the Far East. It is centered on the *Amitābha* Buddha, also known as the '*Amitāyus*' Buddha, whose double name is shortened to '*Amituo*' in Chinese, '*Amida*' in Japanese and '*Adida*' in Korean and Vietnam.

Therefore, with the help from *Amitābha* Buddha, we do not have to rely solely on ourselves to attain enlightenment as we would with other methods. In *Amitābha* cult, we rely on the Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* to help us. Thus, reliance on self and on another are combined as we request by way of our mindful chanting that *Amitābha* Buddha, through this of his vows, it helps us to be reborn in the Pure Land as we breathe our last breath in our present bodies.

The Meaning of '*Amitābha*'

The word '*Amita*' is the negative form of '*mita*', meaning to measure. '*Amita*' therefore means "unmeasured, boundless, and infinite". '*Amita*' is used in English to represent two Sanskrit terms, '*Amitābha*' (*amita-ābha*) and '*Amitāyus*' (*amitāyus*) which means 'Infinite Light' and 'Infinite Life' respectively. Regarding to this, the ninth chapter of the Smaller *Sukhāvatiyūha* states as follows:

"The light, O Śāriputra, of that Tathāgata is unimpeded over all Buddha-fields. Therefore is that Tathāgata called *Amitābha*". Again, the eighth chapter of the Smaller *Sukhāvatiyūha* reads, "The length of the life, O Śāriputra, of the Tathāgata and of those men there is immeasurable. Therefore it that Tathāgata called *Amitāyus*".¹

Amitābha is the most commonly used name for the transhistorical Buddha venerated by all Mahāyāna schools (T'ien T'ai, Esoteric, Zen...) and particularly Pure Land. He presides over the Western Pure Land or *Sukhāvati*, in a previous life *Amitābha* was a monk *Dharmākara*, who vowed that as part of his mission as a *Bodhisattva*, he would purify and adorn a world, transforming it into the most pure and blissful Buddha-land where anyone reborn through utterly sincere recitation of his name.

¹ F. Max Muller (ed.), *Buddhist Mahāyāna Texts* (S.B.E), vol. 49, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997, p. 49.

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The meaning of Ethics

There are many definition 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.²

In the Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it is stated that:

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 way 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 behavior; and the third sense, ethics is a branch of philosophy that is frequently given the special name of Meta ethics.³

According to John S Mackenzie ethics discusses man’s habits and custom, the characters and principles on which we habitually act, and consider what it is that constitutes the rightness and wrongness of those principles, the good of the evil of those habits.⁴

In Buddhism, the term which is considered to be the closest with the concept of ethics in *Śīla* (moral discipline). *Śīla* is one of the threefold discipline, along with mental cultivation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*prajñā*) which constitute the path leading to the end of sufferings.⁵

Ethics in Buddhism

Albert Schweitzer opined, “The Buddha, one of the greatest men of ethics genius ... advanced the ethics ... of humanity.”⁶ So, ethics in Buddhism is not only influenced by the Saṃgha but has strong influenced on the life of human being in general. Because of its important role in the Saṃgha and in the society, it is explained as the acme of evolution of human beings. Regarding to this, Hari Shankar Prasad says as follows:

“The Buddhist ethics is not confined to anthropocentric ethics interest only, but also extends itself to Cosmo centric ethics. Its approach is holistic. The various Buddhas and Bodhisattva are epitomes of this kind of ethics. This marks the highest ethical evolution of a man.”⁷

Human beings function in the society as particular characters having particular behavioral pattern and developing different relations between each other. Moreover, if one performs it well one will get a good result, and one acts to the contrary, one will get the bad result. As Whitehill say:

“Essentially, Buddhist ethics is centered in and on character in community. This focus need to be kept, for upon it depends the future development of a Buddhist ethics more aimed at relationships than principles, more interested in mutual support than a defence of rights, more empathic that rational, mote compassionate than just.”⁸

In the code of Buddhist teachings, its systems and methods are as a map for those who want to escape from the sea of suffering. Its systems and methods are also the way of the Buddha’s life. Nowadays, we are living in the age of development, the valuable ethics of Buddhism from the time of the Buddha is still helpful for mankind of present.

² Paul A.B. Clarke & Andrew Linzey, *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology, and Society*, London: Routledge Publishing, 1992, p. 307.

³ Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, USA: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1972, Vol. III, p. 81.

⁴ Edwards J. Thomas, *The History of Buddhist Thought*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2004, p. 13.

⁵ Robert E. Buswell, Jr (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, USA: Thomson Press, 2004, Vol. I, p. 261

⁶ David E. Cooper & Simon P. James, *Buddhism, Virtues and Environment*, USA: & Jame, S.Pashgate Publishing Company, 2005, p. 50.

⁷ Hari Shankar Prasad, *The Centrality of Ethics in Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007, p. 172.

⁸ Demien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*, Op.cit., p.30.

In *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha teaches the way to realize the true meaning of life,⁹ and in another sense, the value of Buddhist ethics lies in that fact that it is a way of daily life of human being. In the *Majjhima Nikāya Sūtra* 61, the Buddha teaches the Dharma to Rāhula with the simile of mirror. The Buddha asked Rāhula about the purpose of mirror, and Rāhula replied that the purpose of mirror is reflection.¹⁰ This idea of reflection is basic to the Buddhist teaching and it is also influential in the world. This method can guide one along the right way towards freedom and liberation, and it is known as the perfect knowledge and the perfect conduct.

We also see that, in the present time, Buddhist ethics plays a very important role in the development of the world, not only Buddhism, but it is also the main practice in order to enter on the religious path. Moreover, Buddhist ethics should be preserved and practiced in the world as the roadmap to happy life. If one practices these rules one will attain the highest stage of freedom.

“Virtue’s the base on which the man who’s wise
Can train his heart, and make his wisdom grow.
Thus shall the strenuous Bhikkhu, undeceived,
Unravel all the tangled skein of life.”¹¹

Thus Buddhist ethics is a reliable way of living, and also the door to ultimate happiness and liberation.

Ethics in Amitābha Cult

Ethics has got an important place in the tradition of Pure Land.

First of all, the basic teachings of Pure Land tradition is to believe in Amitābha Buddha, and reciting his name, and keep a vow to be reborn in that land. Apart from practicing the recitation of the Buddha’s name, one should also perform good actions so that one can accumulate merits and consequently be saved to get to that land of Amitābha Buddha at the time of one’s death. And the best way to be able to do that is to cultivate the roots of virtues and keep precept (*Śīla*) which is taught in all Buddhist traditions. In the *Sūtra* on Contemplation of Amitāyus, the Buddha says that the following actions should be performed to get rebirth in the Pure Land:

“Whoever wishes to be born there should practice three acts as follows:

1. Caring for one’s parent, attending to one’s teachers and, compassionately refraining from killing, and doing the ten precepts,
2. Taking the three refuges, keeping the various precepts, and refraining from breaking the rules of conducts,
3. Awakening aspiration for enlightenment, believing deeply in the law of causality, chanting the Mahāyāna *Sūtra*, and encouraging people to follow the teachings. These three are called pure *Karma*.”¹²

These statements tell us about the ethical values of our society and if we practice them, they will lead us to become holy human beings. During the time or practice, we must keep *Śīla* to purify our virtues, take refuge in the Triple Gems, and recite the Buddha’s name to purify our mind. This way of practice lead us to the state of liberation, therefore the recitation of the Buddha’s name may be considered as giving a good account of ethical values to the present world.

The concept of ethics in Pure Land tradition is also mentioned in the Longer *Sukhāvataīvyūha Sūtra* with a Chinese translation. In the eighteenth Vows of *Dharmakara Bodhisattva*, the exclusive for the universality of salvation by the compassion of Amitābha Buddha is for those who have committed any of ‘the five heinous sins’.¹³ This passage also seem to indicate some form of ethical conduct on the part of the practitioners.

Furthermore, the theme of typical Buddhist ethics is also regarded in the *Longer Sūtra*. In this *sūtra*, it is taught that the people ‘should thoroughly cultivate the roots of virtue in this life’. The *sūtra* also makes the emphasis on peace

⁹ F.L. Woodward (tr.), *Anguttara Nikaya*, London: PTS, 1900, Vol. II, p. 47.

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Nanamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi (tr.), *The Middle Length Discourse of the Buddha*, London: Wisdom Publication, 1995, p. 524.

¹¹ F. Max Muller (ed.), *Sacred Books of the East, Mahayana Buddhist Text*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2005, Vol. 35, p. 53.

¹² Inagaki Hisao, *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, USA: Numata Center Publication, 1995, p. 96.

¹³ See detail in Luis O. Gómez, *The Land of Bliss, The paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002, p. 167.

and non-violence, describing the Pure Land as a place where people live in peace and there is ‘no need for soldiers’ or ‘weapon’.¹⁴

In addition, in the Pure Land tradition, the theory of ‘other power’, means to rely on the power of Amitābha Buddha for getting practitioners saved to the Land of Bliss; Pure Land tradition also emphasizes the theory of ‘self-power’, means to believe in one’s ability in reciting the Amitābha Buddha’s name to get into the state of mindfulness and attain liberation. This practice normally starts with keeping precepts in a strict way, this helps to purify the practitioner’s body as well as their minds when practicing the recitation. With the right attitude of keeping *Śīla*, it is easy to help the practitioners to follow a moral life in society.

Conclusion

To sum up, we can see that ethics is very important in any religious teaching. Each religious teaching has its own ethical theory which stresses the important of ethics for attaining the final goal. By practicing the mindfulness along with the recitation of Amitābha Buddha’s name or visualization of his image, the practitioner gets an opportunity to return to his peaceful mind, to reflect his own happiness or soreness, he realizes the wrong actions, wrong speech, and wrong thoughts which he has had for his parents, wife, etc. Therefore, with this type of practice as mentioned, people will start to interpret and live one another and make a sympathy with others in a better way. And thus, this will surely make the society happy and peaceful.

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¹⁴ Ibid. pp. 214-5.