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Rajendra P
Research Scholar, Tumkur
University Tumkur,
Karnataka, India

**Venerable Dr. Phrakrud Ghosit
Buddhisat Vajiranyano**
Research Guide, Tumkur
University, Tumkur,
Karnataka, India

Buddhism and positive thinking: A conceptual framework

Rajendra P and Venerable Dr. Phrakrud Ghosit Buddhisat Vajiranyano

Abstract

Buddhist moral precepts provide wholesome foundations for personal and social growth; these are the practical principles for a good life and the cultivation of the virtues. If we understand the objectives of the Pancha sila and realize its benefits, we will see moral precepts as an integral part of the life. Buddhist moral precepts are not a commandments imposed by force; they are the course of training willingly undertaken in order to achieve a desired objective. We do not practice to please a supreme being, but for our own good and good of mankind. As individuals we need to train in morality to lead a good noble life. On a social level, we need to help maintain peace and harmony in society and facilitate the progress of the common goodness. The practice of moral precepts is essential in this regard. The present study is a conceptual framework on Buddhism and the positive thinking that emanates therefrom.

Keywords: dhamma, virtues, positive thinking

Introduction

Buddhism (Buddha Dharma, as Buddhists prefer to call it) seems to be the most anomalous of all globally renowned stereological practices. Strictly speaking, it is neither a religion nor a philosophy—though it has the elements of both—but rather a psychology, i.e. an art of life and a science of mind and behavior. Its initiator, Siddhartha Gautama from the Shakya clan, also referred to as “the Buddha” (awakened one), claimed no divine authority, no special access to wisdom, and no superhuman status of any kind. His teachings subvert the fundamental staple notions of religions and what their adherents cherish the most: a belief in the existence of god, a permanent soul, and a promise of an everlasting bliss in heaven after death. Instead, he taught impermanence, not-self, and un-satisfactoriness to be the fundamental nature of conditioned existence.

He taught that the root of unwholesomeness lies in our own mind—in our ignorance of what we hold as the nature of reality, and that freedom lies in our experiencing/realizing and practicing of acquired wisdom. He urged his fellow travelers not to accept his teachings on faith or authority but to treat them as working hypotheses to be tested in their own real life experiences and to be finally discarded or accepted. Yet, paradoxically, the soteriology that he taught (Called Dharma) has come to be known the people at large for its wisdom, tolerance, compassion, equanimity, and, even, happiness. Our observations through the past few years have led us to the understanding that the Buddha is unique among the founders of wisdom traditions in that he never claimed to be other than just a human being—‘someone who simply woke up and saw things as they are’ (Coleman, 2001, p.5)—thereby implying that every person has a “potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if s/he so will sit and endeavors” (Rahula, 1974, p. 1).

Our fascination with the Buddha, the man, dates back to a familiar story, which each of us encountered in books (Smith & Novak, 2003, and Kornfield, 1993). The story is shared of the Buddha meeting a man on the road, who was struck by the “radiance and peaceful presence” of the awakened one. The story originates from the Dona Sutta¹, and actually describes an encounter between the Brahman Dona and the Buddha, in which Dona follows the extraordinary footprints of the Buddha, finds him sitting in lotus position under a tree, and asks him whether he is a god, a demon, a divine being, or a human being, to which the Buddha consistently denies.

Correspondence
Rajendra P
Research Scholar, Tumkur
University Tumkur,
Karnataka, India

The Buddha then clarifies to the puzzled man that, just like a lotus that rose above the water¹ A Sutta is a discourse in the Palicanon attributed to the Buddha or one of his disciples. Given the hectic pace and high stress of modern life, many people are becoming increasingly interested in the peaceful teaching of Buddhism as a way of life or an applied psychology. Since it has no god or immortal soul at the core of its practice, Buddhism is not a religion in the traditional sense of the word (cf. Coleman, 2001). In effect, the goal of Buddhism is twofold: awakening by cleansing the mind toward emptiness and disseminating loving-kindness, compassion, joy in even-mindedness.

Buddhist morality

Five precepts

The Five Precepts are the teachings of the Buddha to the lay followers. The Buddha hopes that these virtues will be followed by all. The five precepts in Buddhism are:

1. No killing
2. No stealing
3. No sexual misconduct
4. No false speech and
5. No drinking of alcohol (no intoxicants)

No killing means not destroying the life of a being. We cherish our life; therefore, we should cherish the lives of others. We don't like other people to harm our life; therefore, we should not harm other's lives. The human race is not the only one to cherish their lives. All animals cherish their lives, too, and fear death as well. Therefore, we should also love and protect all animals, and refrain from harming them intentionally. To abide by this precept, we will maintain loving kindness, compassion and build up understanding.

No stealing means not taking things not given. Legal procedures and the paying of a fair price have to be involved, when there is a change in the ownership of a property. The legal procedures of ownership are to assure that each individual's essential necessities for survival are protected. If my greediness makes me use illegal methods such as stealing, cheating, robbery using violence, or causes me to not pay a price or any hardship for the ownership of someone else's property, then my type of behavior is disgraceful. To abide by this precept, we will control greed, maintain non-attachment, loving-kindness, and understanding.

All humans have the same desire to continue to live and to be happy. To gain this, everyone should abide by the precepts of 'no killing' and 'no stealing'. If these are followed, then everyone will be able to live their lives peacefully and happily.

No sexual misconduct means no sensual exploitation. Husband and wife are the central components of a family. Buddha taught us that for a husband to treat his wife properly he should at least follow these points:

1. Treat her with due respect and do not look down on her or abuse her,
2. Give her all the control of managing the household,
3. Offer her the housekeeping expenses as well as ornamental items that she loves,
4. Strictly uphold purity and chastity in his conduct. He should not have extramarital affairs.

Similarly, there are at least four points as to how a wife should treat her husband:

1. Be hardworking while orderly managing the household,
2. Cherish resources and be thrifty in domestic expenses,
3. Be understanding, loving, and caring towards her husband,
4. Strictly uphold purity and chastity in her conduct.

To abide by this precept, we will control sensual lust, and maintain content, responsibility and safety, integrity of individuals, family and society. Everyone should abide by the precept of 'no sexual misconduct', so that families can live in happiness and peace.

No false speech means abstaining from false speech. Societies and countries are made up of many individuals. All these individuals have to convey their feelings, thoughts, and exchange their ideas. To do so, they rely on speech. If our speech is inaccurate and dishonest, or it cannot perform the task of conveying feelings, thoughts, and exchanging ideas, it would be as if there is no bridge between the two shores. 'No false speech' can be categorized into four types:

1. No lying - do not speak with dishonesty and defraud others,
2. No idle speech - do not say things which will induce others to have unhealthy thoughts or actions,
3. No double talk - do not gossip or be a talebearer and arouse ill-will between two parties, which can lead to conflicts,
4. No harsh words- do not use abusive language to scold others.

To abide by this precept, we should have mutual confidence and trust, mutual understanding and forgiveness, and cultivate truthfulness and mindful speech. No drinking of alcohol means not taking addictive intoxicants such as opium, morphine, liquor, etc. The precept of 'no drinking of alcohol'- if one is caught in the bad habit of being addicted to these drugs, it will be harmful to one's health, and one will neglect one's work and career. In addition, as one's mind is being anesthetized by these drugs or alcohol, one may commit evil deeds such as killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. Thus, the Buddha also included this rule into the precept.

To abide by this precept, we should abstain from unwholesome excitement, mindful consumption, cultivate mindfulness of good health, concern for myself, my family, and my society.

The Five Precepts can be compared with the Five Virtues of Confucianism: Being humane (benevolence) means not killing and harming; being righteous means not stealing; maintaining propriety means refraining from sexual misconduct; being trustworthy (faith) means no false speech; and being wise (intelligence) means refraining from drinking intoxicating liquor. Thus, the Five Precepts of Buddhism are very similar to the doctrine of Confucianism.

If a person keeps the Five Precepts, then that person's character and morality will be well grounded. If a family keeps the Five Precepts, the character and morality of its members will be in good order. If everyone in an organization, society, or nation keeps the Five Precepts, then that 'body' will certainly enjoy stability, peace, and prosperity.

Some people may think that as long as they do not undertake the Five Precepts, they are exempt from the unwholesome karma associated with the violation of these precepts. This cannot be further from the truth. We only need to visit a prison to realize that all those, incarcerated for their crimes, have violated the Five Precepts in one way

or another. For instance, those who have committed murder, manslaughter, or aggravated assault have violated the precept against killing. Those who are guilty of corruption, misappropriation, or robbery have violated the precept against stealing. Pornography, polygamy, rape, abduction, and prostitution are all examples of violating the precept against sexual misconduct. To engage in fraud, intimidation, and defaulting on loans is to violate the precept against lying. In addition to proscribing alcohol, the precept against intoxicants also includes heroin, cocaine, and other illegal drugs, all of which damage the mind's cognitive abilities and lead one to do unconscionable acts. If everyone upholds the Five Precepts, prisons will be empty.

Human excellence through positive thinking

Positivity is the essence of human excellence. Humans are bestowed with the divine bliss to scale all the five dimensions of human excellence. Positive attitude does not mean that you expect everything to be good all the time but accept that whatever has happened is the best for the given time and situation but with the tacit condition that you put in your very best all the time. In this brief communication the authors unveil the seamless bonding between positive thinking and glow of human excellence.

Fundamentals of positive thinking

The practice of positivity in my opinion requires submission to the following fundamental tenants:

- Know yourself and learn to listen to yourself, your inner voice
- Work for the larger collective good of the society and nature as the self is better served through your service to the society and Mother Nature.
- Stresses are created only when you negate righteousness and work against your own *Swadharma*
- Recognize yourself to be in the company of the Divine, and live a life full of bliss and happiness.
- Remember that the God help those who help themselves (their Self)

It is for this reason that the Lord Krishna was on the side of the Pandavas as it is natural for the Divinity to be on the right side. But when the warrior Arjuna, the mightiest of the Pandavas, collapsed under the pressure of negativity, negating his *Swadharma*, not even recognizing that he is in the company of the Divine (Lord Krishna as his charioteer) he was over powered by negativity which made him collapse at the begging of the Mahabharata War. It took Lord Krishna quite an effort to resurrect him from the vast ocean of negativity in which he was drowned and rather submerged to pull him out and reinstate in him the *Swadharma* of a warrior and make him fight of the righteous cause for which the Mahabharata war was organized, that is to fight against negativity, Adharma, the epitome of the collective might of evil which was represented in Mahabharata as the Kaurvas led by their evil king Duryodhana riding on the misguide of the mischievous Sakuni. For the Sakuni represented the propagation of the life philosophy to achieve the goals and objectives, as maybe set out by an individual or a group, at any cost by adopting any means right or wrong no matter, so as to achieve the goal and objectives with certainty, even though it may lead to destruction of righteousness and submission to all kind of immoral and unethical practices.

Positivity for human excellence

In the context of meaning and purpose of life it is important for us to realize that we as humans are blessed with a unique opportunity to excel in all aspects of our human activity and glow that vital element of human excellence with which the humans are blessed with by the Lord, the Creator. One of the outstanding characteristics of human existence is that it is capable of comprehending the vast surrounding and is able to reflect through its thinking ability backed by a vast reservoir of knowledge and wisdom cultivated over generations after generations through birth and rebirth and through genetic transcription it allows the knowledge and wisdom to be carried forward from one existence to the next. It is this ability of man which is of high importance in cultivation and practice of human excellence.

For human excellence has five dimensions namely, the dimension of knowledge excellence (wisdom), the dimension of professional excellence (*Uthkrustrata*), the dimension of service excellence, the dimension of ethical and moral excellence and last but not the least the dimension of spiritual excellence (Immortality, *Amritva*). In our opinion the above five dimensions of human excellence work together to elevate a man to the level of divinity and thus establish the vital connect with Godhead, enable man to live a life of divine and make him capable of going "Back to Godhead".

Positivity is an essential condition for the cultivation of the above five dimension of human existence for positivity creates the enabling environment for cultivation of excellence whether in acquisition and synthesis of knowledge, utilization of acquired and synthesized knowledge to develop capabilities or use of the capabilities so developed to serve the Self and the society and glow the vital bliss of service excellence. Positivity also inspires to cultivate human values and keeps a man on the side of ethics and morality both in personal as well as in professional life committed to the well-being of the society and service to self and the Mother Nature. As such positivity and human excellence have a seamless bonding as the absence of positivity creates a void for human excellence. Let us not forget that we become what we think of ourselves. As such positivity shall enable us to have positive thinking, shall lead us to positive goals of life and shall inspire us to engage in positive actions for life fulfillment.

Swami Vivekananda, the Indian Vedantic sage who brought India and its vedantic philosophy back to the front stage for a unified world order had said about education of man that "*Education is the manifestation of the perfection that is already in man... Each soul is potentially divine. The purpose of life is to manifest the divinity within.... The end of all education and all training should be man-making*".

Human excellence was the constant theme of Swami Vivekananda. He will welcome this spirit of rajas in our younger generation today, but will also whisper the energy of his Vedantic message into every one of them to raise his or her energies to the higher level of *sattva* through self-discipline and cultivation of ethical and social awareness. That energy then will find expression in a socially oriented will and purpose and dedication, with its constant and spontaneous mood and temper of *tyaga* and *seva*—renunciation and service.

Further while speaking on scientific approach on religion and its sweet fruits, Vivekananda stressed that there are two aspects of human excellence

1. Harmony and peace - Being able to tolerate other regions and views.
2. Strength and fearlessness- Being able to face the truth with courage and confidence.

Vivekananda believes that we should strive to combine strength and gentleness to achieve human excellence. The strength of a positive personality and its values of gentleness and humility creates sattava in thought, deed and actions which enables man to rise to the high alters of name, fame, prosperity and happiness.

For Bharat Ratna Dr APJ Abdul Kalam, the secret of success is in positive thinking, "Thinking should become your capital asset, no matter whatever ups and downs you come across in your life" he said. A boatman's son, who sold newspapers in his childhood became India's greatest scientist and rose to occupy the highest office of the President of India, is the finest example of what can be achieved on the strength of positivity. Kalam represents the nobility full of humility and his eminence glows the brightest in human excellence as scientist, technologist, statesman and above all an inspirational leader having capabilities of breakthrough leadership coupled with speed leadership qualities. The credit goes to his passionate hard work and positive thinking.

Positivity leads to optimism as against negativity which breeds pessimism and drags towards indifference. For Bill Gates, positive thinking leads to optimism "As I look forward, I'm very optimistic about the things I see ahead". Optimism creates unprecedented excitement which in turn breeds positive thoughts giving rise to innovative ideas and creative actions. The vital ecosystem for innovation requires constant supply of noble thoughts which when translated in to new technologies, innovated products and new systems make mankind move on the path of progress and prosperity. For the greatest innovator of our time Steve Jobs, the man who invented iPod, the advice is loud and clear "your time is limited so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't let the other's opinions drown out your inner voice". Does it not sounds like the advice of Lord Krishna in Bhagwad Gita "follow your own *Swadharmā*". Positive thinking emanates from inner voice which creates noble thoughts giving rise to innovations infinite.

Negativity

Our judgment based on our life experience is that negative and positive are two essential aspects of creation and are there to coexist. So long as the negativity is marginalized and kept as an essential evil and so long as it does not erode the horizon of positivity it may be tolerated as essential to sustenance. But if the negativity is allowed to grow to monstrous proportions then it gets prominence over positivity and then it takes a heavy toll of ethical and moral foundation of the human society. It is therefore the moral responsibility of the positive thinking people that they fight the menace of negativity with their strength and conviction of positivity. If not done then the Lord has to intervene and has to organize a Mahabharata war and thus ensure that the evil is punished and the righteousness is reestablished. Lord Krishna is on record to reveal in Bhagwad Gita that:

"Yada Yada hi Dharmasya glanir bhavati Bharata, Abhiyuthyanam Dharmasya tadatmanam srjamaham, Paritranaya Sadhunam binashaya cha dushkritam, Dharma sthapanathaya sambhavami yuge yuge". (Bhagvat Gita 4.07, 08).

Whenever there is a total loss of Dharma based on positivity and righteousness then I appear in this perishable existence to destroy the evil minded (negative thinking) persons so as to establish Dharma, positive thinking and righteousness. But then why allow evil to grow to such monstrous proportions and then compel the Lord to do the clean up! Mahatma Gandhi, the apostle of peace and the father of the Nation has said that "Keep your thoughts positive because your thoughts become your words. Keep your words positive because your words become your behavior. Keep your behavior positive because your behavior becomes your habits. Keep your habits positive because your habits become your values. Keep your values positive because your values become your destiny."

The dharma: the teachings of the Buddha

The Buddha's sermons and teachings pointed toward the true nature of the universe, what is known within Buddhism as the Dharma. He gave his first sermon on the outskirts of the city of Varanasi at a deer park called Sarnath. This first sermon presents an overview of suffering and the way out of suffering. It is called the "Four Noble Truths." The Buddha is often described as a physician who first diagnoses an illness and then suggests a medicine to cure the illness. The "Four Noble Truths" follow this pattern:

1. Life involves suffering, *dukkha*.

The "illness" that the Buddha diagnosed as the human condition is *dukkha*, a term often rendered in English as "suffering" or "unsatisfactoriness." The Buddha spoke of three types of *dukkha*. First, there is the ordinary suffering of mental and physical pain. Second, there is the suffering produced by change, the simple fact that all things—including happy feelings and blissful states—are impermanent, as is life itself. Third, there is suffering produced by the failure to recognize that no "I" stands alone, but everything and everyone, including what we call our "self," is conditioned and interdependent.

2. Suffering is caused by desire and grasping.

The Buddha saw that the impulse to crave, desire, or grasp something one doesn't have is the principal cause of suffering. Because of the impermanence and continuous change of all that we call "reality," the attempt to hold on to it is as doomed to frustration as the attempt to stake out a piece of a flowing river.

3. There is a way out of suffering.

This is the good news of the Dharma. It is possible to put an end to ego-centered desire, to put an end to *dukkha* and thus attain freedom from the perpetual sense of "unsatisfactoriness."

4. The way is the "Noble Eightfold Path."

To develop this freedom one must practice habits of ethical conduct, thought, and meditation that enable one to move along the path. These habits include:

- Right understanding. Really knowing, for example, that unwholesome acts and thoughts have consequences, as do wholesome acts and thoughts.
- Right intention. Recognizing that actions are shaped by habits of anger and self-centeredness, or by habits of compassion, understanding, and love.
- Right speech. Recognizing the moral implications of speech. Truthfulness.
- Right action. Observing the five precepts at the foundation of all morality: not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not clouding the mind with intoxicants.
- Right livelihood. Earning a living in ways that are consonant with the basic precepts.
- Right effort. Cultivating this way of living with the attention, the patience, and the perseverance that it takes to cultivate a field.
- Right mindfulness. Developing “presence of mind” through the moment-to-moment awareness of meditation practice, including mindfulness of breathing, mindfulness of walking, and mindfulness of bodily sensations.
- Right concentration. Developing the ability to bring the dispersed and distracted mind and heart to a center, a focus, and to see clearly through that focused mind and heart.

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