

# Buddhist Ethical Framework in the Pāli Nikāya

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## Abstract

The ethical framework presented in the Pāli Nikāya forms one of the earliest and most systematic expressions of Buddhist moral philosophy. Rooted in the teachings of the Buddha, this framework emphasizes the cultivation of wholesome conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom as the foundation for both individual well-being and social harmony. The Pāli Nikāya presents ethics not merely as a system of rules but as a transformative path that guides human behavior toward the cessation of suffering (dukkha). Central ethical principles such as non-violence (ahimsā), compassion (karuṇā), loving-kindness (mettā), and moral restraint are closely connected with the practices of the Noble Eightfold Path, particularly Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. These teachings illustrate that ethical conduct (sīla) is inseparable from mental purification and insight. Furthermore, the Nikāya texts reveal a pragmatic and psychological dimension of ethics, where moral behavior is understood as essential for the development of a calm and liberated mind. This study examines the ethical principles found in the Pāli Nikāya and analyzes their philosophical foundations and practical applications. It argues that the Buddhist ethical framework offers a holistic approach to morality that integrates personal transformation, social responsibility, and spiritual liberation, making it relevant not only in ancient contexts but also in contemporary ethical discourse.

**Keywords:** Buddhist Ethics, Pāli Nikāya, Moral Discipline (Sīla), Noble Eightfold Path, Five Precepts, Karma (Kamma), Wholesome and Unwholesome Actions (Kusala–Akusala), Compassion (Karuṇā), Loving-kindness (Mettā), Mindfulness (Sati), Wisdom (Paññā), Right Action and Right Livelihood, Moral Causation

## 1. Introduction

The Buddhist ethical framework in the Pāli Nikāya is grounded in the teachings of the Buddha as preserved in the early Buddhist scriptures, emphasizing morality (sīla) as a fundamental component of the path to liberation from suffering (dukkha). This framework is closely linked with the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—and the Four Noble Truths, providing the philosophical and practical foundation for ethical conduct. The Buddhist ethical framework in the Pāli Nikāya is clearly expressed through the basic principles and teachings that the Buddha taught to guide people to live rightly, avoid suffering, and attain liberation. Here are the main points of this ethical framework based on the Pāli Nikāya:

The Buddha taught in the Pāli Nikāya that greed, hatred, and delusion are the roots of all evil actions. Therefore, any action from one of these three poisons is sinful and should be abandoned. On the contrary, any action that abandons greed, hatred, and delusion is a good action, beneficial, and should be developed. This is the foundation for verifying morality by empirical and rational methods, not based on blind faith but aiming at truth and liberation.

In Buddhism, recognizing and eliminating the three poisons is the foundation of the path of practice to attain peace and liberation. The ethical foundation is built on transforming these three poisons through the following practices:

- Eliminate greed by practicing generosity, offering, knowing contentment, and not greedily accumulating wealth, fame, beauty, or material things. Eat moderately, be mindful, and do not let greed dominate.
- Transform anger by practicing patience, forgiveness, keeping a peaceful mind, and not letting anger dominate your actions. Use patience to put aside rage and avoid causing harm to yourself and others.
- Eliminate ignorance by cultivating wisdom, diligently learning, contemplating the truth, and practicing mindfulness to see all phenomena's impermanent and egoless nature, thereby escaping ignorance and illusion.

The three poisons are the "fires" that burn the soul, destroying peace and happiness in life. The basis of Buddhist ethics is to recognize and gradually eliminate these three poisons to live with wisdom, compassion, and peace and, at the same time, escape the cycle of birth and death.

The Buddha taught that when the mind is dominated by greed, anger, and ignorance, people act without realizing the consequences, causing suffering for themselves and others. Therefore, letting go of the three poisons is crucial to attaining enlightenment and liberation.

## 2. Ethical Teachings and Human Conduct.

Buddhist ethics and human behavior focus on cultivating the body and mind, leading people to liberation from suffering and attaining the state of Nirvana. Buddhist ethics are social rules of conduct and a philosophy of life and practice to develop human qualities in the direction of compassion, selflessness, altruism, and wisdom.

Compassion and cultivating the mind to do good: Buddhist ethics stand out with the values of compassion (loving-kindness), joy, renunciation, selflessness, and altruism, guiding people towards Truth-Goodness-Beauty. This is the compass for people to cultivate morality and act correctly.

The Noble Eightfold Path is an eight-step path to help people escape from suffering, including the right View (correct perception), Right Thought, Right Speech (correct speech), Right Action (correct action), Right Livelihood (right livelihood), Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Cultivation, according to the Noble Eightfold Path, includes three elements: Precepts (morality), Concentration (focusing the mind), and Wisdom.

The Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Actions: The Five Precepts are five fundamental prohibitions, including not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery, not drinking alcohol, and not lying. The Ten Wholesome Actions include ten wholesome actions in action, speech, and thought, helping people avoid evil deeds and develop morality.

### 2.1. The Noble Eightfold Path as a Moral Compass.

The Noble Eightfold Path is a profound moral compass rooted in Buddhist philosophy, guiding individuals toward ethical living, mental discipline, and wisdom to alleviate suffering and achieve inner peace. It is a comprehensive orienting tool for human moral life and practice. Just as a compass helps travelers determine the right direction, the Noble Eightfold Path is the true path consisting of eight factors that help sentient beings recognize, practice, and maintain a correct moral, intellectual, and spiritual life toward peace, liberation, and enlightenment.

#### Ethical and Moral Dimensions.

The Path emphasizes moral virtues (sīla), particularly through right speech, action, and livelihood. These cultivate social harmony, reduce conflict, and create a foundation for mental clarity and insight. Ethical conduct is essential for purifying the mind and supports the development of mindfulness and concentration, which are crucial for more profound wisdom and liberation from ignorance.<sup>[1]</sup> Buddhism's ethical and moral dimension is built on the foundation of Sila, which are basic moral rules that guide human behavior so as not to harm oneself and others while developing compassion and wisdom. This is an essential part of the Threefold Training of Sila - Meditation - Wisdom, which is the journey leading to enlightenment.

Right Action, for example, involves making choices that avoid harm to oneself and others, embodying compassion and kindness in daily behavior. Right Speech encourages truthful, kind, and constructive communication. Right Livelihood calls for engaging in occupations that do not cause harm or injustice. Together, these guide individuals to live responsibly and ethically in society.<sup>[2]</sup>

Buddhists are taught to observe basic precepts such as:

Do not kill (humans or animals) because life is precious.

Do not steal.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not lie (including lying, fabrication, double-tongued, and false speech).

Do not be addicted to substances that cause loss of consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Article: The Eightfold Path as an Ethical Compass in the Therapeutic Environment

By Isa Gucciardi, Ph.D.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Howell (October 31, 2014). Eightfold Path to Public Service Enlightenment: Morality

These precepts are not only rules of conduct but also barriers that help people avoid crime, practice justice, equality, and compassion, and avoid the consequences of karma.

Ethics is not based on blind theology or tradition but on reason, practicality, and can be verified through personal experience. The Buddha taught that when one wants to do something, one must consider whether the action will cause harm to oneself or others. If it does cause damage, it is an evil action and should be avoided; if it does not cause harm and brings happiness, it should be done and repeated many times. Buddhism emphasizes considering the interests of oneself and others, including animals, in evaluating moral behavior.

### **The core of Buddhist ethical thought.**

The core of Buddhist ethical thought focuses on two main pillars: compassion and wisdom. Compassion represents love and kindness towards all living beings, while wisdom is a deep understanding of the nature of life and the world. These elements complement each other to form a complete, stable, and lasting personality.

Buddhist ethics guide people to practice a good lifestyle, with knowledge and morality, to build a good and happy life in the present. Practicing morality is keeping the precepts and developing compassion and wisdom to liberate oneself from suffering. The core of Buddhism is also enlightenment about the nature of suffering and the path to escape from that suffering, expressed through the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Enlightenment is the correct perception of the truth of life, thereby eliminating the cause of suffering, leading to liberation from afflictions and the cycle of birth and death.

The goal is not only to live a good life but also to transform the inner self, eliminate the bad, develop the good, and help people to be confident, self-reliant, and responsible for themselves and society. Buddhist ethics aims at liberation from the duality of good and evil, surpassing other ideologies, not only building good people in society but also being a ladder leading to happiness and liberation.

### **Ethical standards in Buddhism.**

Buddhist ethical standards are primarily based on the Five Precepts, which serve as voluntary guidelines rather than strict commandments. These precepts encourage abstinence from (1) harming living beings, (2) taking what is not freely given, (3) sexual misconduct, (4) false speech, and (5) consuming intoxicants that cause heedlessness.<sup>[3]</sup>

These precepts are part of a broader ethical framework that includes the Noble Eightfold Path, particularly the components of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, which guide ethical conduct toward reducing suffering and promoting enlightenment.<sup>[4]</sup> The moral approach in Buddhism is not based on divine command but on the psycho-spiritual law of karma, where wholesome actions lead to enlightenment and unwholesome actions lead to suffering.

The ethical standards in Buddhism are built on the foundation of Morality (Sīla) and Wisdom (Paññā), in which Morality is the initial basis and Wisdom is the ultimate peak. Morality is not the final goal but the means to help practitioners reach liberation and complete purity; Wisdom is the peak that practitioners strive for.

According to the Buddha's teachings to Rahula, the ethical standard is determined based on whether an action is harmful to oneself and others. Specifically:

If an action harms oneself or others, it is bad, brings suffering, and should be avoided.

If an action does not cause harm to oneself or others, it is a good action, brings happiness, and should be done and repeated many times.

Buddhism emphasizes that morality is not based on gods or legends but on rational, practical, empirical, and verifiable rules. Buddhist morality involves avoiding greed, anger, and delusion (greed, anger, and delusion) and performing non-greed, non-anger, and wise actions. In addition, Buddhist morality also includes virtues such as not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery, not lying, and not drinking alcohol or beer (Five Precepts) while promoting qualities such as compassion, tolerance, generosity, patience, non-violence, integrity, uprightness, kindness, gentleness, self-discipline, seriousness in living habits, not being jealous, not being malicious, not being hateful, not opposing, causing a deadlock in society.

<sup>3</sup> The Buddhist approach to ethics and morality. Author : Peter Vredeveld.

<sup>4</sup> Law and Ethics. Author Chara Scroope, 2022.

### **Human ethics and transformation.**

Buddhist ethics is humanistic, emphasizing the training and transformation of people from within through awareness and cultivation, not external imposition. Practitioners who strictly observe precepts, believe in the law of cause and effect, and have compassion will transform themselves and society. Human ethics is the moral foundation for humans, based on the principle of not causing suffering to oneself or others, showing respect, love, and protection of all life and nature. In Buddhism, human ethics is considered as Precepts - Laws, the path to help people live properly, avoid evil, and aim to do good with noble motives, thereby achieving inner transformation and liberation.

Transformation in human ethics is achieved through the awareness of cause and effect, that is, understanding that good and evil actions have corresponding consequences, thanks to which people learn to fear sin, repent, and change their behavior to become better. A typical example is the case of Angulimala, a person who was once evil but was transformed when he met the Buddha, thanks to his awareness and practice of precepts.

The method of transforming human ethics is mainly education, helping people understand good and evil, thereby voluntarily changing their behavior. Human ethics education in Buddhism emphasizes empathy, putting oneself in the position of others to understand and love, and moving towards a lifestyle of compassion, joy, selflessness, and altruism. This is the path to help people perfect themselves, enhance their dignity, and contribute to building a peaceful and happy society. Human ethics is not only a standard of conduct but also a path to transform consciousness, helping people overcome bad habits, moving towards purity and liberation through understanding cause and effect, and practicing correct moral education.

### **Mental and Spiritual Development.**

Mental and spiritual development is a process of inner practice to achieve enlightenment and liberation from suffering. It involves meditation, practicing ethical principles, and training the mind to achieve peace and happiness. You have shown an interest in Buddhist teachings and moral principles, which is a good foundation to begin your journey of mental and spiritual development. The meditation group of the path—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration—focuses on training the mind to release unwholesome states and develop wholesome ones, leading to clarity, insight, and equanimity.<sup>[5]</sup>

Mental and spiritual development from the perspective of the Noble Eightfold Path is understood as a comprehensive journey to help people attain enlightenment, peace and liberation from suffering. The Noble Eightfold Path consists of Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, in which each factor plays an important role in the development of wisdom, morality and spirituality. Right View and Right Intention cultivate an understanding of reality and nurture constructive mindsets, helping individuals detect and nourish positive intentions while subduing negative ones.<sup>[6]</sup>

### **Applying the Noble Eightfold Path in Modern Life:**

**Solving social and environmental problems:** In the context of modern media development, people are becoming less and less interested in each other, and war and environmental pollution are increasing. The Noble Eightfold Path effectively builds a peaceful society, reduces negative things, protects the green planet, and develops sustainably.

**Developing wisdom and compassion:** The Noble Eightfold Path helps develop clear wisdom along with compassion, altruism, giving up ignorance, attachment, greed, anger, and selfishness to achieve peace, happiness, and liberation right in the present life.

Practice the eight factors in daily life:

- Right view: Correct perception, synthesizing knowledge from many sources, respecting different opinions.
- Right thinking: Thinking correctly and understanding the origin of suffering to reduce greed, anger, and ignorance.
- Right speech: Speaking truthfully constructively, avoiding divisive and useless words.
- Right action: Acting rightly by abandoning greed and ignorance, developing compassion, living simply, and avoiding destructive behaviors such as killing, stealing, and lying.
- Right livelihood: Earning a living honestly and avoiding jobs that are harmful to society.
- Right effort: Making efforts to practice staying away from evil.

<sup>5</sup> Noble Eightfold Path. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble\\_Eightfold\\_Path](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Noble_Eightfold_Path).

<sup>6</sup> Joan Marques (January 2017). A Mindful Moral Compass for Twenty-First Century Leadership: The Noble Eightfold Path. The Journal of Values-Based Leadership (JVBL). Woodbury University, [joan.marques@woodbury.edu](mailto:joan.marques@woodbury.edu)

- Right mindfulness: Focusing on the present, avoiding distractions.
- Right concentration: Keeping the mind stable, practicing meditation every day

The Noble Eightfold Path is not just blind faith but a practice based on wisdom, inviting people to see, understand, and practice to attain peace and liberation in this present life. It is the middle way that bears a strong practical imprint in the current era of self-transformation and social transformation, helping people live with wisdom, compassion, and right actions, contributing to building a peaceful, happy, and sustainable world. Applying the Noble Eightfold Path not only in personal life but also in areas such as business helps to enhance moral values and social efficiency.

In summary, the Noble Eightfold Path functions as a mindful moral compass by integrating ethical conduct, mental discipline, and wisdom to guide individuals in reducing suffering and fostering well-being for themselves and others. Its principles offer a flexible yet profound framework for ethical living and decision-making in both personal and professional realms.

## 2.2. Ethical Dilemmas and the Role of Right Action (Sammā-Karman).

Ethical dilemmas in Buddhism are closely related to the concept of Right Action, or Samma-Kammanta, a fundamental component of the Noble Eightfold Path. Samma-Kammanta emphasizes ethical conduct by guiding individuals to engage in actions that uphold moral standards, consciously avoid harm, and promote the well-being of all beings.<sup>[7]</sup>

### The current moral dilemma.

Buddhism recognizes that the current moral decline stems from many causes, such as people gradually losing their sense of shame, not believing in cause and effect, lacking compassion, having too deep an ego, and lacking mindfulness. These factors are intertwined and lead to the overall moral decline in society. In addition, the neglect of moral education in education policy, the decline of traditional behavioral culture, hedonistic lifestyles, individualism, and the influence of Western culture also contribute to the erosion of traditional moral values. The consequences are cold social relationships, loss of trust, polarization between the rich and the poor, and increasing social evils

From a Buddhist perspective, the current ethical dilemma can be understood as a fundamental existential dislocation involving cognitive and moral dimensions, reflecting the widespread suffering and confusion in modern human existence.<sup>[138]</sup> Buddhist ethics centers on the Four Noble Truths, which identify suffering (dukkha) as inherent in life, caused by craving and attachment, and teach that liberation from suffering is possible by following the Noble Eightfold Path. This path includes ethical conduct (right speech, right action, right livelihood), mental discipline, and wisdom, aiming to purify the mind and reduce harmful karma.

The current ethical dilemma, from a Buddhist perspective, is seen as the moral decline in society, stemming from many causes, such as people gradually losing their sense of shame, not believing in cause and effect, lacking compassion, having too deep an ego, and lacking mindfulness in daily life. These factors intertwine and arise together, leading to a general moral decline.

Buddhism points out that the underlying cause of moral decline is educational policies that neglect moral education, traditional cultural values are not maintained and promoted, and society focuses too much on economic development while ignoring the foundation of cultural ethics, leading to a life of enjoyment and selfishness, as well as the influence of Western consumerism and individualism.

In contemporary times, Buddhist ethics addresses dilemmas such as abortion, euthanasia, and attitudes toward animals and vegetarianism, emphasizing non-harm, compassion, and the karmic consequences of actions. For example, abortion and euthanasia are generally viewed negatively because they violate the precept against killing and generate negative karma. However, exceptions may be considered when the mother's life is at risk. The ethical approach is not rigid but contextual, focusing on intention and the purification of the mind to reduce suffering for oneself and others. Moreover, Buddhist ethics critiques the modern scientific-materialist worldview for creating a moral vacuum by separating moral wisdom from knowledge and technology, leading to greed, hatred, and social conflict. Buddhism proposes moral perfection by eradicating these defilements as essential for addressing modern society's psychological and social crises.<sup>[9]</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Significance of Samma-kammanto. <https://www.wisdomlib.org/concept/samma-kammanto>.

<sup>8</sup> Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (1994). A Buddhist Response to Contemporary Dilemmas of Human Existence.

<sup>9</sup> Buddhist Ethics, Moral Perfection and Modern Society, by Prof. P.D. Premasiri. Buddhist Publication Society, Newsletter No. 49, 2002, Sri Lanka

Regarding solutions, Buddhism emphasizes the development of five essential qualities: an attitude of shame, belief in cause and effect, compassion, selflessness, and mindfulness. The practice of these qualities should be at the individual level and spread throughout the community to restore and improve social morality. The fundamental ethical values in Buddhism include observing the five precepts (not killing, not stealing, not committing adultery, not lying, not drinking alcohol) and practicing the six paramitas (giving, keeping morality, patience, diligence, meditation, wisdom). In addition, Buddhism also recommends practicing the ten good deeds to train oneself towards purity and liberation.

Buddhism considers morality as a matter of perception and as a practical application in daily life, helping people transform their body and mind and purify their behavior through body, speech, and mind to bring benefits and happiness to individuals, families, and society. Buddhist morality aims to build a pure, truthful, good, and beautiful culture without greed, anger, ignorance, suffering, and injustice.

In the context of modern society with many problems such as corruption, theft, and social evils, Buddhism promotes the practice of the five basic precepts as a method of cultivation to wash away afflictions and increase good deeds, thereby contributing to building a healthy moral lifestyle, balancing material and spiritual things, and leading to happiness and peace in this life and the next.

In short, from the Buddhist perspective, the current moral dilemma is the decline due to the loss of fundamental values such as shame, belief in cause and effect, compassion, selflessness, and mindfulness. The solution is to develop and practice these values in personal and social life, based on the Buddhist teachings and precepts, to build a just, harmonious, and peaceful society.

### **Ethical Dilemmas and the Role of Right Action (Sammā-Karman).**

The role of Right Action (Sammā-Kammanta) in ethical dilemmas is to provide a clear moral framework that guides individuals to act in a way that avoids harm and promotes peace and integrity. It is a key component of the Noble Eightfold Path in Buddhism, which emphasizes ethical conduct through bodily actions. This is essential because the concrete practice of the Noble Eightfold Path maintains the right physical action that does not harm oneself, others, or the environment.

### ***Aspects of Right Action (Samma-Kammanta) in Ethical Dilemmas.***

**Abstention from Harm:** Right Action requires refraining from killing or harming any living being, reflecting a deep respect for life and the principle of non-violence (ahimsa). This includes humans, animals, and even insects, focusing on intentional acts of harm or killing.<sup>[10]</sup> Buddhism also teaches abstinence from harmful actions and materials that pollute the soul, such as abstaining from eating the meat of animals with high spirituality or that have close connections with humans, because killing them will bring heavy consequences. For monks, there are also special abstentions, such as not eating the five pungent flavors (garlic, onion, chives, coriander, and shallots) to keep the mind pure.

**Avoidance of Theft:** In Buddhism, avoiding stealing is one of the five basic precepts, specifically the second precept in the Five Precepts, to ensure fairness and guide people towards non-greed, non-anger, and non-delusion. The precept of not stealing prohibits the direct appropriation of other people's property and includes acts of fraud, deception, and taking advantage of power to obtain property illegally. It involves abstaining from taking what is not freely given, which includes stealing by force, fraud, or deceit. Both the intention and the act are essential, as karma is affected by the ethical quality of the action.

Buddhism distinguishes two types of theft: direct theft (taking property without permission) and indirect theft (deception, fraud). All property, whether large or small, precious or cheap, including the property of ghosts, gods, or temple keepers, is not allowed to be taken without permission. Bodhisattva practitioners must also maintain the precepts of the mind, which means that even when the mind thinks of stealing, it violates the precepts.

The reason Buddhism prohibits stealing is that this behavior causes harm to others, causes social injustice, lacks compassion, and creates bad karma, leading to painful consequences in the present and future, such as poverty, hell, or being an animal to pay off karmic debts. The Buddha advised that if one keeps the precept of not stealing and practices charity, one will be loved by everyone, increase compassion, and enjoy the blessings of peace and happiness. In short, avoiding stealing in Buddhism means maintaining morality by not appropriating other people's property,

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<sup>10</sup> THE WORD OF THE BUDDHA, by Venerable Nyanatiloka Mahathera “ Right Action (Samma-kammanta)”  
A. X. 176.

keeping a pure mind without thoughts of stealing, practicing charity, and having compassion for all living beings to avoid creating bad karma and enjoying blessings.

**Refraining from Sexual Misconduct:** This means avoiding sexual acts that cause harm or violate trust, such as adultery or relationships prohibited by social and moral conventions. For monastics, it implies strict celibacy; for laypeople, it prohibits sexual misconduct like adultery.

Buddhism considers sex to be part of desire (lust), one of the root causes of suffering and reincarnation. Therefore, controlling desire, including sexual desire, is necessary to move toward purity and liberation. Buddhism does not entirely prohibit sexual relations for lay people. Still, it emphasizes that they must be performed within the framework of morality, not committing adultery, not causing harm to others, and not violating moral principles such as adultery, having sex with minors, or coercion. For monks and nuns, the precepts strictly prohibit all sexual acts because desire is a significant obstacle on the path of practice and enlightenment. Violators will be expelled from the Sangha.

Buddhist laypeople need to have a healthy attitude and cultural behavior and avoid adultery and improper sexual behavior that destroys relationships and brings bad reputations to themselves and their families to protect the right to happiness and reduce social evils.

Controlling desires, including sexual desires, is done through mindfulness, meditation, and wisdom practice to recognize the impermanent and polluted nature of the body, thereby transforming the mind and not being controlled by desires.

When having thoughts of lust, monks are advised to meditate on the disgust of the body to extinguish the desire. If they cannot control themselves, they should postpone their vows or return to lay life to avoid serious violations of the precepts.

Chanting sutras, reciting Buddha's name, and repenting are methods to help relieve craving, maintain precepts, and purify the body and mind. Buddhism advises lay people to practice sexual relations within marriage, with love and mutual respect, avoiding wrong sexual behaviors such as adultery, rape, or relationships with minors.

### ***Practical Role in Ethical Dilemmas.***

Right Action is a practical expression of one's inner intentions and moral views, guiding behavior to reduce suffering and cultivate peace within oneself and society. It helps individuals navigate ethical dilemmas by providing clear guidelines on what actions to avoid to maintain moral integrity and harmony with others.

**Buddhist Ethics as the Foundation for Right Action and Decision:** Buddhism views ethics not as a mere belief but as a way of life practiced to bring peace and happiness to people in the present and liberation in the future. Buddhist ethics is based on the law of cause and effect, in which every good or bad action creates karma and will lead to corresponding consequences. Therefore, in ethical dilemmas, Buddhists are encouraged to be aware of their karma, exercise self-control in their actions, and take responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

Buddhist ethics are pivotal in shaping human behavior and decisions, guiding individuals to live a righteous, harmonious, and meaningful life. Adherence to these precepts provides a solid foundation for right behavior, contributing to building a peaceful and harmonious society. Buddhist ethics go beyond curbing bad behavior and promote the development of compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness. When faced with life choices, Buddhist practitioners rely on a deep understanding of cause and effect and compassion to make decisions that benefit themselves and the community. Mindfulness helps to perceive the consequences of each action, thereby avoiding impulsive, thoughtless decisions.

Buddhist ethics help to develop qualities such as patience, tolerance, honesty, and humility. These qualities beautify the individual, create a positive living environment, and improve the quality of social relationships. They help to reduce suffering and increase happiness. When behavior and decisions are based on ethics, people will avoid harmful actions, thereby reducing suffering for themselves and others. At the same time, inner peace and true happiness will increase thanks to the harmony between thoughts, words, and actions.

Helping people develop self-discipline and caring attitudes

Buddhism emphasizes the role of self-discipline in maintaining morality. It is not the imposition of rules from outside but the willingness and effort to overcome difficulties to perform the right behavior. When things get tough, Buddhists need to care about others and think carefully about how their actions will affect everyone before they act.

It helps people develop self-discipline and a caring attitude. Buddhism emphasizes the role of self-discipline in maintaining morality. It is not the imposition of rules from outside but the willingness and effort to overcome difficulties to perform the right behavior. In difficult situations, Buddhist practitioners need to develop an attitude of

sincere concern for others, carefully consider the impact of their actions on others, and then choose the most appropriate way to behave.

Buddhism helps people develop self-discipline and caring attitudes through many specific aspects of education and practice based on the foundation of will, self-awareness, and compassion:

- Developing self-discipline in Buddhism. Self-discipline is the companion of will: self-discipline helps people have the ability to be patient and persevere in the face of physical, emotional, and mental challenges. It supports people to give up instant gratification for something better, which requires effort and time.
- Self-awareness and control of inner urges: Buddhism teaches people to become aware of their unconscious urges, thereby being able to reject harmful desires and help to choose appropriate attitudes and reactions instead of being dominated by emotions or habits.
- Discipline in the group is voluntary, not imposed: for example, in the Buddhist Youth Association, discipline is not strict compulsion but self-awareness, self-acceptance of mistakes, and self-correction. Buddhists have the responsibility to help friends recognize their mistakes in a constructive and inspiring spirit, demonstrating the spirit of self-awareness and altruism (care for others).
- Practice to master your mind: Buddhism is a religion of self-awareness and voluntariness, encouraging each person to practice on their own, master their thoughts, and eliminate greed, anger, and ignorance to have a calm, peaceful, and happy mind.

Developing a caring attitude in Buddhism:

- Compassion is a fundamental value: compassion in Buddhism is not only ordinary love but also deep sympathy for the suffering of others and the desire to relieve the suffering of all people and all species. Compassion has a broad meaning, including unconditional love without discrimination and the motivation to help others.
- Compassion helps to form compassion and moral action: Compassion makes the heart vibrate with the suffering of others, is a remedy to soothe pain, and at the same time creates respect, harmony, love, and help in society, contributing to building healthy relationships and solidarity
- Education on tolerance and mutual love: Buddhism emphasizes tolerance, respect for the right to life of all people, and opposition to indifference and selfishness. Compassion is considered a necessary moral quality for a better and warmer society.
- The attitude of Buddhists towards suffering: Buddhists are advised to be sensitive to the suffering of others, not to be indifferent to society, to show compassion, and to act to help

### Addressing Ethical Dilemmas.

When faced with ethical dilemmas, the principle of Samma-Kammanta guides practitioners to:

- Evaluate actions based on their potential to cause harm or benefit
  - Choose actions aligned with compassion, non-attachment, and moral integrity
  - Recognize that ethical decisions are not isolated but affect one's karmic trajectory and the well-being of others
- Buddhist ethics is based on the law of cause and effect - karma, according to which all good and evil actions create corresponding karma that people must receive. No one can avoid the consequences of the karma they create. Ethics is understood as the precepts the Buddha taught to prevent evil and develop good, bringing peace and happiness to everyone and all species. Buddhism emphasizes the separation from egoism and takes the idea of dependent origination and egolessness as the central theme in ethics. This helps people escape attachment and reduce greed, anger, and ignorance - the root cause of all evil.

### Buddhist Solutions to Moral Decay.

Buddhism identifies the causes of moral decay as a lack of shame, disbelief in cause and effect, lack of compassion, egoism, and lack of mindfulness. Therefore, the solution is to develop five qualities:

Shame.

Belief in the law of cause and effect.

Compassion.

Selflessness.

Mindfulness.

Practicing these qualities in individuals and communities will help transform social morality positively, reducing wrongdoing and conflict.

### **The role of precepts and moral practice.**

Buddhism's morality is about avoiding evil and actively doing good with pure motives. The Buddha taught that mastering the three doors of Body - Speech - Mind, not doing evil, voluntarily doing good, and doing good with noble motives is the foundation of human morality. Through that, people can transform bad karma into good, from ordinary people to saints.

Buddhist morality is also expressed through strictly keeping precepts, training the mind to eliminate ignorance, greed, anger, and delusion, and attaining liberation and enlightenment. Precepts are ethical norms that help monks and lay people live healthily, surpassing common moral values .

Thus, Right Action serves as both a practical and spiritual compass in navigating complex moral situations, emphasizing intentionality and the cultivation of wholesome conduct as essential to ethical living and liberation from suffering.

### **3. The Interconnection between Personal and Social Ethics.**

Personal and social ethics have a close, reciprocal relationship in which each side influences and adjusts the other to create harmony in social life. The interconnection between personal and social ethics lies in how individual moral principles influence, and are influenced by, the collective moral standards that govern society.

Personal ethics originate from people's awareness, feelings, and responsibilities towards themselves and society. Personal ethical behaviors are the concrete manifestation of social and moral standards in each individual. When individuals perform correct behaviors that benefit the community and contribute to enriching themselves and society, social ethics are strengthened and developed. Personal ethics refer to the individual's morals and code of conduct, deeply ingrained through family, friends, and personal experiences. These ethics guide a person's decisions and actions by distinguishing right from wrong based on values like honesty, loyalty, integrity, respect, and selflessness.<sup>[11]</sup> Personal ethics shape how individuals behave in both private and public spheres and form the foundation of their character.

Social ethics is a system of values and common community standards regulating individual behavior to ensure common interests and social order. It does not deny legitimate individual interests but guides individuals to achieve those interests within the framework of not harming society, the community, and others. Social ethics has superior regulatory power, awakening the conscience and responsibility of individuals and helping them voluntarily comply with ethical standards. Social ethics encompasses the moral norms and values that regulate behavior within a community or society. These ethics are collective and aim to promote justice, equality, solidarity, empathy, and mutual respect among people. Social ethics guide interpersonal and collective relationships and emphasize social responsibility, ensuring that individuals and organizations act for society's common good and well-being. They are based on universal principles such as fairness, dignity, and social justice, which apply to all members of society regardless of differences.

Legitimate personal interests promote the development of social ethics when individual needs are recognized and reflected in new ethical standards. Conversely, social ethics is a way to regulate personal interests, helping to avoid behaviors that destroy common values. The harmony between individual interests and social ethics contributes to both development while improving the quality of social ethics and the sustainable development of society.

Conflicts between personal interests and social ethics may arise, especially in a market economy. Resolving this relationship well requires a harmonious combination of interest relationships, placing national and ethnic interests above all else and promoting the role of ethics in social management to orient the proper development of personal interests, avoiding social and moral degeneration and degradation.

Interconnection Between Personal and Social Ethics:

- **Mutual Influence:** Personal ethics influence societal norms, as the values held by individuals collectively shape social ethics. Conversely, social ethics reinforce and sometimes reshape personal beliefs by establishing shared expectations and rules for behavior within the community. For example, a person who values fairness may support social policies promoting equal opportunities.

<sup>11</sup> Difference Between Personal And Professional Ethics – Byjus.

- Shared Values and Norms: Both personal and social ethics emphasize core values such as honesty, respect, justice, and empathy. These shared values bridge individual conduct and societal expectations, fostering harmony and cooperation.
- Social Responsibility and Ethical Behavior: Personal ethics motivate individuals to act responsibly towards others, while social ethics institutionalize this responsibility through norms and laws that promote the common good. This interplay encourages individuals to consider the impact of their actions on society and to act ethically beyond self-interest.
- Moral Development and Ethical Decision-Making: An individual's stage of moral development affects how they integrate personal and social ethics. At higher levels of moral reasoning, people make decisions based on universal ethical principles that transcend personal gain and social conventions, reflecting a deep alignment between individual morality and social ethics.
- Resolving Ethical Dilemmas: Ethical conflicts often arise when personal ethics clash with social ethics. Navigating these dilemmas requires understanding both dimensions and striving for alignment to maintain trust, social cohesion, and progress. For example, a doctor may struggle between personal beliefs and societal rights but must balance these to act ethically.

### 3.1. Compassion (Karunā) and Altruism in Buddhist Ethics.

Compassion (Karunā) and altruism are two core ethical values in Buddhism, closely related but distinct in content and expression. It is a central and dynamic principle that involves a deep feeling of concern for the suffering of others, accompanied by a strong desire and ethical commitment to alleviate that suffering. It is one of the four brahmavihāras (divine abodes), alongside loving-kindness (mettā), sympathetic joy (muditā), and equanimity (upekkhā), serving as a foundation for both ethical conduct and meditative practice.

#### Compassion (Karunā) in Buddhist Ethics.

Compassion is understood as the deep desire to free all living beings from suffering and the causes of suffering. It is not only pity but also the will to act to alleviate the suffering of others. Compassion is one of the four immeasurable minds (Loving-kindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy, Equanimity) taught by the Buddha, which is the driving force that makes the mind vibrate before the suffering of others, and at the same time, is respect, harmony, and love for everyone, and respect for everyone's right to live. The Buddha expressed compassion through actions such as giving alms, keeping precepts, and helping living beings, and this is considered his Ariyacariya, a noble way of life, free from selfishness.

Compassion is inseparable from non-harming (ahimsā) and is expressed through moral conduct aimed at alleviating the suffering of all living beings. It is not passive but an active force that motivates moral actions such as refraining from killing and engaging in acts of charity, advocacy of justice, and ecological care.

The ethical foundation of compassion is deeply rooted in the recognition of universal suffering (dukkha) and the interconnectedness of all beings. Compassion, known as "karuna" in Pali and Sanskrit, is an emotional response and a profound ethical and spiritual principle that motivates alleviating suffering for oneself and others.

Compassion is the fundamental value, the moral foundation of Buddhism, the source of joy (joy with others) and renunciation (letting go, not being attached), forming the Four Immeasurable Minds - four noble states of mind in Buddhism. Compassion arises from the wisdom (panna) that comes from understanding the nature and causes of suffering. This wisdom reveals the interconnectedness of all beings, inspiring an altruistic desire to relieve them of their suffering. Compassion is, therefore, inseparable from wisdom; it is the active expression of a profound understanding of samsara (the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth).<sup>[12]</sup>

Compassion is not just a simple emotion or love but also a driving force for altruistic action, helping others overcome suffering, expressed through relief and support for the poor, the sick, and those suffering in society. Compassion in Buddhism is associated with wisdom, not weakness or cowardice, but a combination of true love and deep understanding of the dependent origination of all things, helping people to behave correctly, responsibly, and effectively. Buddhism emphasizes compassion's immeasurable and boundless nature, meaning that love and empathy must expand infinitely, without limitations in space, time, or object.

<sup>12</sup> The Practice of Compassion. By Ven. Karuna Dharma.

Compassion is based on the Buddhist principle of dependent origination, which posits that all things and phenomena exist in a relationship and cannot exist independently. The selfless, mutually supportive, grateful, and repaying view of life is the foundation for developing compassion, demonstrating equality and harmony among living beings. Compassion is not love based on attachment or personal preference but is altruistic, immense, non-discriminatory love that exists forever until all suffering ends. Compassion, wisdom, and mindfulness form the ethical foundation for transforming suffering, resolving conflicts, building a peaceful society, and sustainable development.

The role of compassion in ethics and society:

- Compassion is the foundation for building human personality, maintaining social order, and is the core ethical principle of not harming all things in thought, word, and action; at the same time, one must live truthfully, honestly, tolerably, and humanely.
- Compassion promotes actions to help others, the desire to bring happiness to all people and all species, respecting the right to life, and the basic human need for happiness
- Compassion is also the foundation of world peace because it arises from altruism and deep sympathy, helping people live kindly, lovingly, and in solidarity.
- In family and social education, compassion is considered infinite, genuine love expressed through filial piety, knowing how to repay parents, and developing good personalities for the next generation.

The ethical foundation of compassion is a combination of unconditional love, deep empathy with the suffering of others, the Buddhist principles of dependent origination and equality, together with wisdom and mindfulness to guide people to altruistic action, building a peaceful society, sustainable development, and a perfect personality.

### Compassion as a Core Ethical Principle.

Compassion is one of the Four Immeasurable Virtues (Brahmaviharas), alongside loving-kindness (metta), empathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha). These virtues form the ethical framework guiding Buddhist conduct. Compassion directs ethical behavior, encouraging practitioners to refrain from harm, practice generosity (Dana), and cultivate kindness in thought, speech, and action. It is universal and non-discriminatory, extending to all beings regardless of their nature, as rain nourishes all plants without distinction.<sup>[13]</sup>

Compassion involves both an emotional and an active dimension. It is more than sympathy or pity; while sympathy is feeling sorrow for another's suffering from a distance, compassion requires a deeper engagement—"to suffer with" someone and to be moved to support or relieve their suffering.<sup>[14]</sup> This dual aspect includes:

- A passive moment of being emotionally touched by another's suffering.
- An active moment of taking concrete steps to alleviate or support the person in their suffering.

Thus, compassion is not merely an emotional response but a virtue and moral disposition that motivates ethical actions and a continual readiness to help others

Compassion is not passive, weak, or pessimistic, but a powerful force that motivates people to use their intelligence, mind, and means to help, to help people escape suffering and achieve happiness. Compassion is giving joy, saving, and eliminating suffering for all material and spiritual living beings. It is a beautiful symbol of the human heart of compassion and altruism, both a perception and a practical action to save lives.

In professional and leadership contexts, compassion is a key virtue that fosters ethical behavior. It encourages leaders to "walk in the shoes" of others, promoting altruism and ethical treatment based on the "Golden Rule"—treating others as one would wish to be treated. Compassion in leadership is about involvement and genuine concern for the well-being of others, not just distant sympathy.

Compassion is critical in clinical decision-making and medical ethics. It shapes how healthcare professionals understand and respond to patients' suffering, extending beyond physical symptoms to psychological and spiritual dimensions. Compassion demands not only technical expertise but also emotional sensitivity and a commitment to support patients through their suffering, including facing the fear of death and other existential concerns.<sup>[15]</sup>

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all major religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions. It calls for treating all individuals with justice, equity, and respect, recognizing the inviolable dignity of every human being. Compassion

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Lisa Kemmerer (January 21, 2013). Buddhist Ethics: Compassion for All

<sup>14</sup> Compassion As A Key To Ethical, Professional Leadership. Published Feb. 12, 2009. By Col. Michael Chyrek

<sup>15</sup> S M Gallagher (1999 ). THE ETHICS OF COMPASSION.

urges us to dethrone ourselves from the center of our world and place others there, working tirelessly to alleviate suffering and refrain from causing harm. It is also a call to reject violence, exploitation, hatred, and discrimination, emphasizing empathy and the shared humanity of all people, including enemies.

Buddhism takes compassion as the fundamental morality, the mind of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. In practice, compassion is considered the root, the basis for developing morality and wisdom towards enlightenment. Compassion is one of the Four Immeasurable Minds (Loving-Kindness, Compassion, Joy, Equanimity), with "Loving-Kindness" being the desire to bring benefits and happiness to others, and "Compassion" being the hope to eliminate suffering for others. Compassion is an essential moral value that builds good feelings between people, promoting solidarity and mutual love in society.

Compassion helps people to be moved by the pain of others, thereby forming a mentality of being ready to help and save those suffering. It is also the foundation of personality education, helping people to develop love, know how to be filial to their parents, and fulfill their duties to their family and society. In modern society, compassion still plays an essential role in strengthening social ethics and perfecting human personality. Compassion is a core ethical principle because it expresses immense love, equality, and tolerance towards all species and is also the driving force that motivates people to act for the common good, towards enlightenment, and happiness for all living beings.

Buddhists cultivate compassion through meditation techniques such as metta bhavana (loving-kindness meditation) and karuna bhavana (compassion meditation). These practices develop empathy and a deep sense of interconnectedness, helping practitioners overcome self-centeredness and emotional barriers like anger and aversion. Ethical precepts and acts of generosity further embody compassion, fostering social harmony and individual spiritual growth.

### **Transformative Potential.**

Compassion in Buddhism is transformative both personally and socially. On an individual level, it leads to emotional resilience, self-awareness, and the reduction of self-criticism. Socially, it promotes kindness, empathy, and social responsibility, contributing to a more harmonious and compassionate society. Compassion is not sentimental pity but a wise, active engagement to alleviate suffering without enabling harmful behaviors.

Compassion is the foundation of enlightenment and wisdom: In Buddhism, compassion is not just ordinary pity but a divine, transcendent force that leads to wisdom. This wisdom helps to eliminate ignorance, achieve enlightenment, and become a Buddha. Therefore, compassion has the most profound potential to transform people, helping them overcome suffering and reach ultimate liberation.

Compassion is the holy virtue of the Buddha and the practitioner: Compassion results from long-term efforts in cultivation, a natural, noble way of life, without any trace of selfishness. People who practice compassion will gradually perfect themselves, expressed through acts of charity, keeping precepts, doing good deeds, and overcoming greed. Compassion helps people not only avoid causing harm but also actively help relieve suffering and bring happiness to all living beings.

Compassion transforms the self and society:

- At the individual level, compassion helps transform selfishness, greed, and anger into love, tolerance, and willingness to help others.
- At the social level, compassion builds healthy, united, civilized relationships, reduces hatred and tension, and creates common peace and happiness.

Compassion is deep sympathy and the will to relieve suffering: Compassion is not only pity but also great compassion, seeing the suffering of sentient beings as one's suffering, which arises the will to alleviate that suffering. This strongly motivates practitioners to practice and act to help constantly.

Methods of practice to develop compassion: Buddhism has many methods to build compassion, from not harming others to practicing charity, keeping precepts, doing good deeds, and finally, living an enlightened life, preaching to convert sentient beings. Through that, compassion is not just a state of mind but becomes a practical action and way of life.

Compassion in Buddhism has excellent potential for transformation, helping individuals overcome suffering and attain enlightenment, and contributing to building a peaceful and humane society. Compassion is a sacred power and a moral and intellectual foundation that helps people develop a comprehensive personality and live in harmony with all living beings.

### Interplay with Wisdom (Paññā).

Compassion and wisdom in Buddhism are two fundamental and complementary elements, forming a solid foundation for practitioners on the path of practice and enlightenment. Compassion in Buddhism is closely linked with wisdom. Compassion without wisdom can be misguided, while wisdom without compassion may lack moral grounding. This interplay ensures that compassionate actions are mindful, ethically sound, and effective in alleviating suffering.

Compassion is a feeling of immense love and deep pity for all suffering and confused beings. Compassion is a feeling of love for others and an energy that pervades the universe, a source of motivation to help, comfort, and guide beings out of suffering and confusion. In Buddhism, compassion is expressed through charity, material and spiritual help, and teaching the Dharma to help others reduce ignorance and suffering.

Wisdom is the correct understanding of the nature of phenomena, cause and effect, impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and non-self. Wisdom helps practitioners perceive the causes and consequences of actions, avoid ignorance and delusion, and help distinguish right from wrong, good from evil. Wisdom in Buddhism includes worldly wisdom (understanding cause and effect in life) and transcendental wisdom (deep knowledge of liberating truth).

The combination of compassion and wisdom is essential. Compassion without wisdom will lead to weakness, irresponsibility, and even harm due to thoughtless actions. On the contrary, wisdom without compassion can easily become rigid, lacking in compassion, and can lead to unkind actions. Therefore, Buddhism emphasizes “Compassion and Wisdom in Dual Function” — compassion and wisdom must go together and support each other so that practitioners can enter the Buddha body, attain enlightenment, and conduct themselves appropriately in life.

Wisdom helps compassion not be limited by emotions or personal prejudices, assisting practitioners not to cling to their views but to open their hearts to the diversity of the world and humanity. Compassion helps wisdom develop comprehensively, not only to understand but also to act for the benefit of sentient beings. In Buddhism, compassion is the energy that encompasses all things, the root for all practitioners, while wisdom is the light that illuminates the mind. Together, the two form the firm legs and high-flying wings of practitioners, helping them not to be led astray by afflictions and the five aggregates of demons, living in peace and liberation.

### Social and environmental ethics.

Social and environmental ethics are expressed through many profound and practical aspects, such as philosophy and concrete actions to build a peaceful and sustainably developed society. Besides individual spiritual development, *karuṇā* has a broader social dimension. It encourages Buddhists to engage in social engagement, cooperation, and concern for social welfare, including addressing social inequality, conflict, and environmental crises. Thus, compassion bridges individual liberation with collective harmony and social justice.

Social ethics from compassion in Buddhism:

- The spirit of compassion in Buddhism is a vast, immense love, expressing equality and tolerance towards all beings, regardless of social status or personal circumstances. Compassion is the desire to bring happiness, help, save, free people from suffering, and contribute to building a healthier, more united, civilized social relationship.
- Compassion promotes altruistic actions, helping the needy, the poor, the sick, and those who suffer. This is not only mercy but also concrete actions such as disaster relief, supporting people without housing, building charity houses, and educating poor children.
- Compassion can also resolve social conflicts with kindness, forgiveness, tolerance, and equanimity. This helps to fix hatred, create opportunities for harmony and solidarity, reduce violence, and build a compassionate community.
- Educating compassion also contributes to developing the qualities of tolerance, solidarity, and mutual love in society, helping society avoid apathy, selfishness, and hatred and move towards sympathy and mutual understanding.
- The family shows compassion through filial piety, knowing how to repay parents' kindness, nurturing and preserving traditions, and contributing to forming good personalities for children.

Environmental ethics from compassion in Buddhism:

- Buddhism emphasizes the precept of “not killing,” not only for humans but also for all living beings, cultivating compassion, avoiding hatred, and protecting all life.
- Compassion promotes environmental protection actions such as using biodegradable products, planting trees, sorting and recycling waste, protecting animals, and living in harmony with nature. This is the foundation of eco-

ethics, promoting sustainable development and considering nature as a companion rather than an object to be controlled.

- Buddhism also encourages a clean lifestyle, not littering, waste treatment to ensure environmental hygiene, organizing animal release ceremonies, and vegetarianism to minimize adverse environmental impacts.

- The Buddhist view of nature does not follow dualistic opposition. Still, it emphasizes symbiosis and interdependence, helping people abandon the attitude of dominating and controlling the environment, moving towards a harmonious lifestyle, and respecting life.

Compassion in Buddhism is the foundation of social and environmental ethics, motivating people to act altruistically and tolerantly, protect life, and live in harmony with nature, contributing to building a peaceful, civilized, and sustainably developed society.

### **Altruism in Buddhist Ethics.**

Altruism in Buddhism is closely related to compassion and refers to selfless concern for the welfare of others. It is an essential principle that encourages practitioners to act for the benefit of all beings without attachment to personal gain. Altruistic behavior is seen as a natural expression of compassionate wisdom and is vital for promoting positive mental health and social harmony.<sup>[16]</sup>

Altruism is the wish that all beings find happiness and the causes of joy, accompanied by the determination to do everything possible to make that wish come true. It is built on the foundation of compassion and kindness, which means coming from love and sympathy, knowing how to put oneself in the situation of others to feel deeply and perform acts of unconditional help, even sacrificing one's interests. Altruism is also the expansion of compassion in the face of suffering, forgiveness, and tolerance of others' mistakes, and it is a necessary practice on the path to liberation.

In Buddhism, altruism is understood as the selfless giving and helping of others without expecting anything in return or recognition. It is a moral obligation and a transformative practice that cultivates compassion (*karunā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*), leading the practitioner to enlightenment. Altruistic love is the sincere wish for others to find happiness and the causes of joy, together with the determined effort to realize this wish.<sup>[17]</sup> This altruism arises from selflessness, transcends ego, and cultivates boundless love and harmony. Buddhism teaches that all sentient and insentient beings are interconnected and interdependent, so our actions affect others and ourselves in a cycle of cause and effect (*karma*). Cultivating altruism creates positive ripples in this web of interconnectedness, benefiting both the giver and the receiver.

### **Altruism as a Buddhist Essence.**

The spirit of altruism is fundamental to all major Buddhist traditions—Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna. It is composed of qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, wisdom (*paññā*), loving interest (*Chanda*), and self-knowledge (*attaññutā*). Through wisdom, one understands the impermanence and interdependence of life, which frees one from self-attachment and suffering. Compassion arises from passionate devotion to alleviate the suffering of others, motivating altruistic action.

In Buddhism, altruism is understood as selfless concern for the well-being of others, involving acts performed without expectation of reward or recognition. It is closely linked to compassion (*karuṇā*) and loving-kindness (*mettā*), which are among the four immeasurable qualities (*brahmavihāras*) that practitioners cultivate. Altruism arises from recognizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings, leading to a natural impulse to help others and alleviate their suffering.

The Buddha taught that true altruism is not about sacrificing oneself to the detriment of one's well-being but about harmonizing concern for both self and others. He emphasized that the highest form of goodness is to care for one's own good and the good of others simultaneously. This balanced approach avoids the dichotomy of selfishness versus selflessness, recognizing that personal transformation and helping others are mutually reinforcing.

Anātman is the foundation of altruism in Buddhism. The Buddha taught that there is no truly independent self but that all things exist in a relationship of interdependence. When people let go of the self and its possessions, they will no

<sup>16</sup> Compassion and Altruism: Promoting Positive Mental Health in Buddhism. Author : Peter Vredeveld.

<sup>17</sup> The Meaning Of Altruism In Buddhism. By LotusBuddha. <https://lotusbuddhas.com/the-meaning-of-altruism-in-buddhism.html>

longer be bound by conditions or personal interests to practice altruism. At that time, when they see suffering, they will help unconditionally, without seeking or selfishness.

#### ***The Meaning and Role of Altruism:***

- Altruism is not just a temporary state of mind but can become a lasting way of life, a generous quality nurtured by concern for the fate of all around. It is associated with happiness because joy and satisfaction arise from lovingkindness, while selfishness and hostility lead to suffering.

- In practice, altruism purifies the mind, nurtures goodness, and benefits everyone. It is the glue that binds together family, friendship, and extends the circle of compassion in the social community. Altruism is also a practice that helps increase morality and wisdom, leading to complete enlightenment.

#### ***How to practice and develop forgiveness according to Buddhism:***

- The Buddha taught how to resolve anger, one of the fundamental afflictions, to open the heart to forgiveness. Practicing the Four Immeasurables (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity) is the optimal method to help transform anger, release resentment, and spread compassionate energy to everyone, including those who cause us anger.

- Contemplating causes and conditions and realizing the law of cause and effect helps us let go and not be angry with life. From there, it is easy to forgive and expand our hearts of forgiveness.

- Altruism is also extended to the Bodhisattva ideal, where practitioners seek liberation for themselves and the benefit of all sentient beings. The altruistic mind of a Bodhisattva is the foundation for cultivating the great path and achieving Buddhahood.

- Altruism in Buddhism also has a broad social vision, redefining the individual self to include everyone in the community, creating social justice and harmony.

#### **Philosophical and Practical Foundations:**

Buddhism's philosophical and practical foundations of altruism are built on two fundamental elements: compassion and selflessness. Altruism in Buddhism is not only a moral quality but also an essential practice on the path to liberation, helping to purify the mind, nurture goodness, and perform beneficial deeds for all.

Buddhist altruism is metaphysically grounded in the understanding of no self (anatta) and dependent origination (pratīyasamutpāda), which reveal that the self is not an independent entity but part of a web of relationships. This insight fosters empathy and dissolves egoistic barriers, making altruistic behavior a natural expression of wisdom and compassion.<sup>[18]</sup>

Practically, altruism manifests in the practice of generosity (dāna), one of the Six Perfections (pāramitās) in Mahayana Buddhism, and in the Bodhisattva ideal—where one vows to attain enlightenment not only for oneself but for the liberation of all sentient beings. The Bodhisattva path exemplifies altruism as the supreme commitment to the welfare of others, often placing one's needs above one's own.

Altruism benefits both the giver and the receiver. It cultivates inner peace, reduces negative emotions like anger and selfishness, and promotes positive mental health by fostering social connectedness and a sense of purpose. Acts of altruism generate happiness and life satisfaction, contributing to the practitioner's spiritual progress and well-being.

#### ***Ethical and Spiritual Role.***

Ethical role:

- Forgiveness is one of the most noble moral principles taught by the Buddha, helping people eliminate anger - one of the three root poisons (greed, anger, ignorance) that harm the soul and body.

- Forgiveness helps transform hatred and resentment into love, forgiveness, and peace, building a society of truth, goodness, and beauty, from violence to peace.

- Buddhist ethics emphasize cultivating the mind and character, knowing how to forgive, be tolerant, and respect differences and fellow human beings, thereby promoting altruism in personal and community life.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacob Neusner; Bruce Chilton (2005) Editor. Altruism In World Religions. Chapter 5: Altruism In Classical Buddhism, by Todd Lewis.

The Spiritual Role of Altruism in Buddhism:

- Altruism is in the heart of compassion, a manifestation of bodhicitta, and when combined with wisdom, it will lead to complete enlightenment.
- The highest altruism in Buddhism is selfless altruism, when people let go of their self-possession to help others without conditions or personal pursuits.
- Forgiveness is the "nectar" that extinguishes the fire of anger, repels war, hatred, and violence, and brings peace and happiness to individuals and society.
- Buddhist teachings advise people to live altruistically, selflessly, compassionately, and joyfully, helping people to live ethically, lovingly, and equally with everyone.

In short, altruism in Buddhism is not only a moral duty but also the essence of the path to enlightenment. It is rooted in understanding interconnectedness and expressed through compassion, generosity, and the bodhisattva ideal. By cultivating and developing altruism, practitioners transform their bodies and minds and contribute to the happiness and liberation of all sentient beings, embodying the Buddha's teaching that the highest good is the well-being of oneself and others.

### **The Relationship Between Compassion and Altruism.**

- Compassion is the foundation for altruism; when faced with suffering, compassion will form altruistic love.
- Altruism in Buddhism is not only an emotion but also a concrete action, nurtured by wisdom and understanding of selflessness, cause and effect, helping people overcome anger, expand tolerance and forgiveness.
- Both aim to reduce suffering for others and bring happiness, which are moral qualities that help purify the mind, increase morality, and progress towards enlightenment.

### **3.2. The Social Dimensions of Buddhist Morality**

The social dimensions of Buddhist morality emphasize harmony, compassion, and ethical conduct as essential for creating just and compassionate societies. Buddhist ethics is rooted in principles such as generosity (dāna), moral discipline (sīla), wisdom, and compassion (karuṇā), which extend beyond individual conduct to social responsibility and community welfare.

#### **Generosity and Sharing.**

The Buddha strongly encouraged giving and sharing, even among people experiencing poverty, to cultivate spiritual wealth and social harmony. Charity and social welfare are integral, with historical examples like the merchant Anathapindika and King Ashoka, who promoted public welfare by building hospitals, parks, and other communal facilities.

Generosity is a manifestation of compassion in Buddhism. People who forgive others are considered noble, great, and generous. Generosity helps people who make mistakes readily admit and correct their mistakes, and at the same time, it eases conflicts and resentments in society. Buddhism teaches that because people are mortals, it is difficult to avoid errors, so we need to have tolerance to forgive and help each other to correct and develop. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring legal or social responsibilities but instead not seeing the offender as an enemy, maintaining humanity, and creating conditions for positive change.

Sharing in Buddhism comes from compassion and the spirit of equality. The Buddha taught that everyone is equal in status and rights, and no one is born rich, poor, or inferior. Therefore, sharing is not an equal distribution but an exchange based on love, sympathy, and joy in merit. Those who are capable will share with those who are weaker so that they can rise by themselves. Sharing is not only about material things but also about sharing knowledge, experience, and social welfare to build a fair, harmonious, and sustainable society.

Compassion is the core foundation of humanism in Buddhism. A compassionate person not only loves himself but also opens his heart to everyone, willing to share joy and ease the suffering of others. Altruism is shown through helping without expecting anything in return, including the poor, the suffering, or even those who lead a dissolute, sinful life. This manifests an open, tolerant, and profoundly humane heart.

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Generosity and sharing in Buddhist ethics are simple actions that result from cultivating compassion, tolerance, and awareness of equality among living beings. Through that, Buddhism guides people to a life of peace, harmony, and sustainable development in the social community.

### **Social Justice And Non-Discrimination.**

Buddhism does not divide society according to class, caste, gender, or skin color. The Buddhist community consists of monks and lay people who support each other without distinction between rich and poor or between men and women. This reflects a profound view of social justice, promoting equality and humanity in human relations. Buddhism opposes rigid social hierarchies like the caste system, advocating equality among all people regardless of birth. This egalitarian stance underpins Buddhist social ethics and emphasizes justice and harmony in society.

Buddhism conceives of equality in two main aspects: equality of Buddha-nature and equality of virtue. The Buddha taught that every living thing has Buddha nature, meaning that everyone has the potential to become enlightened and become a Buddha and that no one is superior to anyone else in this ultimate nature. He once said, "I am a Buddha already. You are Buddhas to be," affirming the absolute equality of the potential for enlightenment among all people. Equality in Buddhism is not based on rank, social status, or class but on virtue and practice. The Buddha established a monastic community without distinction of caste, gender, wealth, or skin color, eliminating all social prejudices of the time. This spirit of equality attracted people from the lowest classes in ancient Indian society, such as enslaved people or people with low incomes, as well as those from the highest classes, such as Brahmins or kings.

Justice in Buddhism is not just about the fair distribution of wealth or material things but also about harmony and transformation within individuals and communities. The Buddha taught that suffering and injustice arise from ignorance, greed, and hatred – the three poisons of the mind- and that true justice begins with transforming these negative tendencies through mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion.

Buddhism emphasizes the principle of karma (the law of cause and effect), according to which every action has a corresponding consequence, creating individual and collective responsibility for building a just society. Actions that arise from compassion and wisdom will create positive karma, contributing to reducing suffering and promoting social justice.

In addition, the concept of interdependence in Buddhism shows that all phenomena and all people are interconnected and influence each other. Therefore, social justice cannot be separated from concern for the common welfare, peace, and non-violence. The Buddha built a society without distinction of class, gender, or ethnicity, aiming at a harmonious, free, and fair community.

### **Social Welfare and Compassion.**

Buddhist monasteries traditionally served as centers for social welfare, providing shelter, education, and care for the poor and sick. Mahayana Buddhism particularly emphasizes lay Bodhisattvas engaging in social welfare for the safety and benefit of others.

As demonstrated in Buddhist teachings and societal practices, social welfare and compassion are closely related and complementary. Buddhism is a spiritual path and a profound ethical system that deals with social welfare. Social welfare in Buddhism is understood to be broader than mere material needs; it also includes spiritual development and liberation from mental suffering. Buddhism emphasizes that human happiness can only be achieved by being free from alienation and suffering, that is, by attaining liberation (nirvana).

Buddhism values serving society and humanity as a way to serve the Buddhas, with people as the center, with a spirit of compassion and engagement. Buddhists pray for themselves and know how to contribute their assets and abilities to serve others and society.

Buddhist Sangha organizations with the spirit of “selflessness” and “selflessness” are essential in implementing social welfare activities such as education, health care, and social stability. Buddhism also emphasizes the non-violent approach, moral education to solve social problems, and not using violence or tricks to achieve welfare goals.

Compassion arises from the observation that all living beings have the same nature, suffering together, so to save others from suffering and bring joy is also to save oneself. Compassion in Buddhism is divided into many levels, from the small compassion of ordinary people to the great compassion of the Buddha, showing the expansion and depth of the

compassionate heart. Compassion is not weak pity but deep sympathy and the desire to relieve suffering for everyone based on respect for the dignity and equality of all living beings.

Social welfare in Buddhism is built on the foundation of compassion. Compassion is the driving force behind social service actions, helping others not for personal gain but for the common well-being and happiness of the community. Buddhism considers serving society and helping others as the most practical way to express compassion and, at the same time, as a way to practice the teachings, leading people to liberation from suffering. People who have achieved purity of mind will naturally develop compassion and contribute to society selflessly.

Social welfare and compassion in Buddhist ethics are two closely related factors. Compassion is the spiritual foundation promoting social welfare activities, and social welfare is a concrete manifestation of compassion in practical life, contributing to building a fair, humane, and happy society.

### **Interdependence of the Individual and Society.**

Buddhist social ethics is grounded in dependent co-arising, which holds that individual betterment and social good are interdependent. A peaceful and secure society supports individual spiritual growth, and individuals are responsible for social harmony and welfare. The interdependence between individuals and society is evident in the reciprocal, equal, and mutually beneficial relationships between individuals in society. Personal ethics is about self-improvement and the responsibility to build and maintain harmonious social relationships, from the family to the larger community.

Buddhism teaches that each individual should perform moral duties in relationships such as parent and child, husband and wife, teacher and student, friends, leader, and employee, all based on the principle of mutuality and love for humanity. When individuals maintain compassion, without greed or anger, society will develop in the direction of justice, equality, and harmony, without oppression or exploitation.

Buddhist ethics also emphasizes the observance of personal precepts such as the five precepts (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no drinking alcohol) and the six paramitas (charity, morality, patience, diligence, meditation, wisdom) to train oneself, thereby contributing to creating a healthy, ethical society. These values help individuals move towards liberation and regulate behavior in social relationships, creating correct standards of conduct. The family is considered the cell of society, in which individuals are responsible for themselves and other members of society. When the family is built firmly in terms of material and spirit, society will also develop stably and prosperously. Therefore, personal and social morality in Buddhism are closely linked and support each other.

In addition, Buddhism also emphasizes the relationship between humans and nature, believing that humans depend on nature and vice versa, so it is necessary to live with moderation in desires, knowing enough to achieve sustainable happiness, and at the same time preserve the living environment. The interdependence between individuals and society in Buddhist ethics is expressed in the fact that individuals must cultivate morality to fulfill their duties in social relationships based on love, equality, and responsibility, thereby contributing to building a fair, harmonious, sustainably developed, and peaceful society.

### **Ethical Social Relationships.**

The Buddha taught that moral responsibility includes reflecting on how one's actions affect oneself and others, promoting actions that avoid harm and foster good results. Wisdom and compassion guide social relationships, extending care to all living beings without discrimination. Ethical social relationships in Buddhism are built on the foundation of teachings of compassion, equality, and humanity, aiming to guide people towards personal moral perfection and develop harmonious and fair social relationships.

Buddhism emphasizes the role of personal ethics in a fair society, and each person needs to strive to perfect their personality and fulfill their duties in social relationships. Relationships between people only have lasting value when based on mutuality, equality, and mutual benefit. The Buddha taught that relationships in the family and society, such as parents - children, husband and wife, teachers - students, friends, leaders - employees, monks - followers, must all perform five mutual duties, originating from compassion and non-attachment, to build love, sympathy and sharing in society.

### **Ethical principles in relationships.**

Buddhism has specific ethical rules that regulate behavior in social relationships, expressed through the six-direction rituals, including:

- Relationship between children and parents.

- Relationship between husband and wife.
- Relationship between teacher and student.
- Relationship between friends.
- Relationship between employer and servant.
- Relationship between monks and laypeople.

These principles help regulate individual behavior to be appropriate and accurate in each relationship, contributing to building a pure, honest, good, and beautiful society without oppression or exploitation.

Buddhism promotes moral values such as compassion, joy, selflessness, altruism, cultivating the mind, doing good deeds, and liberation. Followers observe the five precepts (no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct, no lying, no drinking alcohol) and practice the six paramitas (charity, morality, patience, diligence, meditation, wisdom) to train themselves and contribute to a better society. The belief in the law of cause and effect, impermanence, and selflessness in Buddhism creates spiritual strength to help people overcome material temptations, move towards a humble lifestyle, love for others, and abandon greed, anger, and ignorance - the causes of conflicts and social violence.

Buddhism focuses on personal moral perfection and cares about building family and social relationships based on the six harmonies, which emphasize equality and love among social classes, eliminate class distinctions, help people get closer, and treat each other humanely. The Buddha taught that everyone has the same red blood and salty tears, arousing the spirit of love and sharing in society. Ethical social relationships are a combination of personal moral cultivation and the practice of principles of conduct in social relationships, aiming to build a fair, equal, loving, and harmonious society, reducing greed, anger, ignorance, suffering, and injustice toward happiness and liberation for everyone.

### **Moral education and personality development.**

Buddhism plays an essential role in personality education, especially for the younger generation, through Buddhist youth clubs, helping to raise awareness of goodness, kindness, and compassion in society. Based on the Buddha's teachings, moral education and personality development are core areas that guide people towards enlightenment, liberation from suffering, and building true peace and happiness.

Buddhist ethics (or Buddhist ethics) is a system of moral values based on compassion, joy, selflessness, and altruism. This ethics is not only a set of rules of conduct but also a way of cultivating the body and mind to realize the meaning of life towards Nirvana, escaping the sea of suffering. Buddhist ethics is expressed through morality (Śīla), an essential part of the Noble Eightfold Path, including the commitment to harmony, self-restraint, non-violence, and not causing harm to living beings.

The three pillars of Buddhist ethics include avoiding evil, stopping evil, and doing good with noble motives, creating the foundation for happiness and human values. Buddhist ethics is a theory and a practical action in life, helping people develop human qualities, self-reliance, and self-awareness.

### ***Personality Development in Buddhism:***

Buddhism considers personality as the pinnacle of a psychological and moral whole, in which the best personality is a selfless personality, that is, transforming the "false self" into "no self." Personality includes the characteristics of thinking, feeling, and behaving, which are formed by cultivating and realizing human beings' impermanent and selfless nature.

Buddhism views personality from a deeper perspective than modern psychological theories when analyzing instincts, desires, and delusions (greed, anger, and ignorance) as manifestations of a false self that causes suffering. A good personality is free of greed, anger, and ignorance, which is a manifestation of selflessness. Therefore, personality education in Buddhism transforms from greed, anger, and ignorance to non-greed, non-anger, and non-delusion to attain true peace and happiness.

### ***Buddha - Model of Personality and Morality:***

The Buddha embodies noble moral qualities such as compassion, altruism, humility, justice, equality, perseverance, patience, and sacrifice. The Buddha's compassion is not only sympathy but also a positive force to act to save sentient beings and save himself from suffering. His altruism comes from his enlightenment about impermanence, selflessness, and the law of cause and effect, which helped him overcome anger and ignorance and avoid suffering.

The Buddha also broke down all social class boundaries, promoted fairness and equality, and used compassion to treat everyone kindly. His perseverance, patience, and sacrifice are examples of accepting difficulties, not avoiding responsibility, and overcoming all challenges to attain purity and liberation.

Moral education and personality development cultivate the body and mind according to the values of compassion, selflessness, altruism, and wisdom. Through that, people are guided to transform greed, anger, and ignorance into non-greed, non-anger, and non-delusion, building a good personality and creating happiness for themselves and society. The Buddha is an exemplary model of personality and morality, with noble virtues as a guideline for practicing and developing personality in Buddhism.

#### 4. The Relevance of Buddhist Ethics for Contemporary Society.

Buddhists emphasize renunciation, altruism, compassion, mindfulness, and pursuing a virtuous life. These principles focus on understanding and transforming human suffering through ethical living and inner growth rather than external dogma. The moral framework promotes awareness, compassion, and equanimity, essential for personal happiness and social harmony in today's complex world.<sup>[19]</sup>

Worldly spirit and practical application: Buddhist ethics with the worldly spirit does not stop at theory but is also widely applied in many areas of modern social life. Buddhism aims to solve practical problems such as natural disasters, traffic accidents, and corruption by constructing specific action programs based on teachings such as the Noble Eightfold Path, advising people to give up greed, anger, and ignorance to move towards happiness and peace for society.

Buddhist teachings on non-violence (ahimsa), compassion (karuṇā), and interdependence (pratīyasamutpāda) provide a valuable ethical vocabulary for tackling issues such as conflict, inequality, environmental degradation, and social fragmentation. The Middle Way—a balanced approach avoiding extremes—offers a model for sustainable economic development, environmental stewardship, and balanced governance, promoting moderation and thoughtful deliberation in policy and personal conduct.<sup>[20]</sup>

Humanistic and social ethical values: Buddhism promotes the values of compassion, charity, saving the suffering, not killing, not stealing, not lying... These standards are very suitable for the cultural and ethical traditions of Vietnamese society and many modern societies, contributing to building people with good moral qualities and reducing the phenomenon of degeneration and apathy in society.

Despite originating over two millennia ago, Buddhist ethics transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. Concepts like mindfulness and compassion have been integrated into secular fields such as psychology, ecology, and peace studies, demonstrating their broad applicability. This universality allows Buddhist ethical teachings to serve as a shared moral language across diverse contexts—from urban education to global peace efforts.

Personal ethics and social responsibility: The law of cause and effect in Buddhism teaches each person to be responsible for their thoughts and actions, forming a solid personality and personal ethics. Social relationships are built on mutual support, equality, and mutual benefit, contributing to social justice and harmony.

Buddhist ethics guide individuals toward self-mastery and moral clarity, influencing personal conduct, social justice, and collective well-being. They encourage a reasoned, humane approach to worldly problems, emphasizing inner transformation as the foundation for outer peace and cooperation. This ethical orientation is increasingly relevant in an era marked by ideological polarization, mental health crises, and disconnection from spiritual values.<sup>[21]</sup>

Addressing contemporary social issues: Buddhism not only focuses on spirituality but also actively engages in other social areas such as environmental protection, climate change response, addressing violence and abuse, and building social trust. Buddhist teachings are considered an effective tool for sustainable social development and addressing “hot” issues of contemporary society.

##### 4.1. Environmental Ethics and Sustainability.

Environmental ethics and sustainability are built on a profound doctrinal foundation, notably the theory of Dependent Origination, the law of Cause and Effect, the view that all living beings are equal, and compassion. Accordingly, all

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<sup>19</sup> Relevance of Buddhist Ethics in Contemporary World. By Dr Anusha Shakya, 2021, Interdisciplinary Journal of Contemporary Research.

<sup>20</sup> The Relevance of Buddha's Thoughts in Modern World : Attaining Peace, Cooperation, and Shared Prosperity". By Pratik Salvi.

<sup>21</sup> Amartya Sen (2014). The Contemporary Relevance of Buddha.

phenomena in nature are related by cause and effect, and humans are not the ultimate subject with the right to arbitrarily exploit or destroy the living environment. The natural environment is the foundation of all existence, and all living beings have equal value, including plants and animals.

Buddhism promotes mindfulness, love for all species, and living in harmony with nature, forming a healthy, environmentally friendly lifestyle such as vegetarianism, contentment, limiting killing, planting trees and afforestation, saving resources, reusing, and maintaining public hygiene. Compassion (*karuna*) in Buddhist teachings is not only love but also promotes practical actions to protect all species and the environment, contributing to the fight against climate change and ecological degradation.

Regarding sustainability, Buddhism does not pursue material values but aims at inner enrichment, living simply, peacefully, and happily. Sustainable development in Buddhism is understood as harmonious development between individuals and communities, economic growth, social justice, and environmental protection, based on the principles of cause and effect and dependent origination. Buddhism emphasizes development that does not harm future generations and does not destroy nature, while promoting wisdom, eliminating ignorance, and living with contentment to protect the environment sustainably.

### **Interconnectedness (Pratītyasamutpāda or Dependent Origination).**

Buddhism teaches that all living beings and the natural environment are deeply interdependent. This worldview fosters a sense of responsibility for the environment because harming nature ultimately harms all life, including humans.<sup>[22]</sup>

Pratītyasamutpāda, commonly known as Dependent Origination or Dependent Arising, is a fundamental Buddhist doctrine explaining all phenomena's interconnected and conditional nature. It states that everything arises dependent on multiple causes and conditions—"if this exists, that exists; if this ceases to exist, that also ceases to exist". This principle denies the existence of any independent, unchanging self or entity, emphasizing that all things exist only with others within a vast web of interdependence.

At its core, Pratītyasamutpāda reveals that nothing exists in isolation; every event, object, and experience is the result of a complex network of causes and conditions. This interconnectedness applies universally—from physical phenomena to mental states, from individuals to the entire cosmos. Philosophically, Pratītyasamutpāda is closely tied to the concept of emptiness (*sūnyatā*), which means phenomena lack inherent, independent existence and are empty of a permanent self. Understanding this interdependence helps dismantle attachments and ignorance, which are the roots of suffering.

Practically, this teaching encourages mindfulness and ethical living by highlighting how our actions are interconnected with the world around us. Recognizing that all things co-arise fosters compassion and responsibility toward others and the environment, as nothing exists separately from the whole. Pratītyasamutpāda is the Buddhist insight into reality's dependent, interconnected nature, illustrating that all phenomena arise, persist, and cease through a network of causes and conditions.

### **Karma and responsibility.**

Karma and responsibility in Buddhism emphasize that every action, including those affecting the environment, has consequences that impact not only the individual but also the wider world and future lives. Buddhism teaches that when a person cultivates the right mindset and acts with compassion and mindfulness, their actions benefit themselves, the environment, and all living beings.<sup>[23]</sup>

The principle of karma underscores that selfishness and craving lead to harmful actions toward the environment, resulting in suffering that perpetuates across lifetimes. Therefore, being mindful and compassionate toward nature improves both one's future and that of the planet. This ethical framework encourages people to take responsibility for their environmental impact, recognizing that harming nature ultimately harms themselves and others due to the interconnectedness of all life.<sup>[24]</sup>

Buddhist teachings advocate for respect for wildlife and the environment, urging an end to indifference and promoting harmony, peace, and balance with the natural world. This involves curbing greed and excessive desires that drive

<sup>22</sup> Environmental Ethics of Buddhism. By Oyuna V. Dorzhigushaeva and Aryana V. Kiplyuks.

<sup>23</sup> Kosala Abeykoon (2023). Buddhism and the Environment.

<sup>24</sup> Surya Narayan (2023). Buddhism and Environmental Protection: A Journey Towards Harmony and Compassion

environmental degradation, and instead embracing values such as simple living, contentment, and care for all sentient beings.

Practically, this responsibility is expressed through non-harming (ahimsa), mindful consumption, and right livelihood, which guide individuals to avoid actions that damage ecosystems or exploit natural resources. Many Buddhists adopt vegetarianism and sustainable living lifestyles to reduce harm and create positive karma for themselves and the environment.

### **Ahimsa (Nonviolence).**

Ahimsa, meaning nonviolence or non-harming, is a central ethical principle in Buddhism that requires refraining from causing physical, verbal, or mental harm to any living being. It extends beyond merely avoiding violent acts to include the intention behind actions, emphasizing the cultivation of compassion, kindness, and eradicating negative traits such as anger, greed, jealousy, and pride that can lead to harm.<sup>[25]</sup>

In Buddhist practice, ahimsa is embodied in the First Precept, which instructs practitioners to avoid taking life and respect all beings' right to life, not just humans. This principle fosters empathy and compassion, recognizing that violence causes suffering not only to the victim but also to the perpetrator through negative karmic consequences. Ahimsa is a personal moral discipline and a philosophical foundation for peace and harmony. The Buddha taught that hatred and violence cannot be overcome by more hatred but only through nonviolence and loving-kindness.

Practically, ahimsa encourages lifestyles and behaviors that avoid harm to animals and the environment, promoting vegetarianism, environmental protection, and peaceful coexistence. It calls for mindfulness in speech, thought, and action to prevent harm and cultivate a compassionate attitude toward all life forms. Ahimsa in Buddhism is a comprehensive ethic of non-harming that encompasses action, intention, and attitude, guiding practitioners toward compassion, peace, and respect for all living beings and the environment.

### **Buddhist Ethical Practices Supporting Sustainability.**

**Mindfulness and moderation:** Buddhist ethics encourage mindfulness of the impact of one's actions on the environment and advocate moderation in consumption and lifestyle. This reduces waste and promotes sustainable living.<sup>[26]</sup>

Mindfulness and moderation form a practical ethical framework that challenges consumerism and environmental exploitation. They promote a balanced, compassionate approach to life that respects the limits of nature and fosters sustainability, aligning personal well-being with the health of the planet

**Respect for Nature:** Rituals, customs, and teachings emphasize respect for nature. The Buddha's life events, such as his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, symbolize the sacredness of the natural world<sup>[27]</sup>. Buddhism views the natural environment as an essential and sacred part of life, emphasizing that all living beings—including humans, animals, plants, and ecosystems—are interconnected and interdependent. This interdependence means that the well-being of the environment is crucial for all life forms, making respect for nature a moral imperative. Buddhist teachings encourage mindfulness and compassion toward the environment, promoting sustainable living practices such as reducing waste, conserving resources, and protecting natural habitats. The principle of ahimsa (non-harming) extends to all forms of life, discouraging the destruction of animals, plants, and even grass, reflecting a profound respect for even the smallest aspects of nature. Historically, Buddhist monastic communities have practiced environmental stewardship by planting trees, maintaining clean water sources, and avoiding pollution of natural resources. The Buddha taught respect for nature through rules prohibiting polluting grass and water, emphasizing cleanliness and care for the environment as ethical duties. Nature is also regarded as a sacred space for spiritual growth and reflection. Significant events in the Buddha's life occurred in natural settings—such as his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree—highlighting the spiritual significance of forests and natural habitats. These places continue to be revered and protected by Buddhists worldwide.

**Non-pollution and Cleanliness:** Buddhist monastic rules prohibit polluting natural resources like water and grass, reflecting an early ecological awareness and respect for the environment. Buddhism emphasizes non-pollution and cleanliness as essential ethical practices rooted in respect for nature and compassion for all living beings. Several Vinaya rules from the Buddhist monastic code prohibit monks from polluting natural elements such as green grass and

<sup>25</sup> Ahimsa (Nonviolence). By Dr. Justice Chandradasa Nanayakkara.

<sup>26</sup> Protecting Environment through the Teachings of Buddha. Author: Raghawi

<sup>27</sup> Lily de Silva (2005). The Buddhist Attitude Towards Nature.

water with saliva, urine, or feces, reflecting an early ecological awareness and commitment to environmental cleanliness. These rules were designed to maintain the purity of natural resources shared by all beings, underscoring the ethical responsibility to avoid contaminating water sources like rivers, ponds, and wells, which are essential for community use. Cleanliness is highly commended in Buddhism, both in personal conduct and in environmental care. Maintaining a clean environment is an extension of mindfulness and compassion, ensuring that one's actions do not harm or degrade the natural world. The Buddha's teachings encourage people to use natural resources cautiously and respectfully so that others can benefit from them without harm. In contemporary practice, this principle translates into living simply and mindfully to minimize environmental damage, avoiding pollution, and protecting natural habitats. Buddhist teachings advocate for sustainable living, promoting awareness of how individual and collective actions affect the environment, and encouraging proactive steps to reduce pollution and conserve nature.

#### **4.2. Social Justice and Conflict Resolution.**

Social justice and conflict resolution are deeply intertwined with the core teachings of Buddhism, emphasizing compassion, non-violence, and the cultivation of ethical virtues to address individual and societal suffering.

Buddhism views social justice not only as the fair distribution of rights and obligations but also as an inner transformation, based on core principles such as compassion (karuna), interdependence, and the law of cause and effect. The Buddha desired a just, free, non-violent society without distinction of caste, gender, wealth, or colour. There is no class division in the Buddhist community, but everyone is equal, supporting each other between monks and lay people, creating a harmonious and just society. Teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path guide people to identify the causes of suffering (including injustice, poverty, discrimination), seek liberation, and build a just society based on wisdom and right action. Compassion motivates practical action to eliminate injustice and suffering, while promoting respect and dignity for all people.

#### **Buddhist Foundations for Social Justice**

Buddhism approaches social justice not primarily through legal or institutional frameworks as in Western models, but through personal ethical transformation and communal harmony. The Buddha's teachings, especially the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, provide a foundation for understanding and alleviating suffering (dukkha), which extends to social suffering caused by injustice and inequality.<sup>[28]</sup>

Buddhism views social justice not only as the fair distribution of rights and obligations but also as an inner transformation, based on core principles such as compassion (karuna), interdependence, and the law of cause and effect. The Buddha desired a just, free, non-violent society without distinction of caste, gender, wealth, or colour. There is no class division in the Buddhist community, but everyone is equal, supporting each other between monks and lay people, creating a harmonious and just society.

- Compassion (Karunā) and Loving-kindness (Mettā): These virtues are central to Buddhist ethics and serve as the basis for promoting equitable and just societies. Compassion motivates action to alleviate others' suffering, while loving-kindness fosters respect and empathy across social divisions.<sup>[29]</sup>

- Rejection of Social Hierarchies: Historically, the Buddha challenged the rigid caste system of his time by ordaining individuals from lower social statuses, signaling an early commitment to social equality and human dignity.

- Interdependence (Paṭiccasamuppāda): This principle highlights the interconnectedness of all beings and social structures, suggesting that social justice is achieved through the well-being of all members of society, including spiritual communities, households, and the state.

Balance Between Individual Rights and Social Control: Buddhist social philosophy envisions a society where individual morality and communal good are balanced, aiming for a "right ordering" of society that supports justice and harmony.

#### **Conflict Resolution in Buddhist Ethics.**

Buddhism sees conflict as the result of ignorance, craving, and ego, so conflict resolution must begin with inner transformation, identifying and letting go of these afflictions. Practicing mindfulness helps people clear their minds,

<sup>28</sup> Sitthiporn Khetjoi, Phra Worachat Thasa (2017). THE BUDDHIST PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN APPLICATION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

<sup>29</sup> Buddhist ethics and human rights: Tracing convergences and contradictions. By Azmina Aktar

clearly see the nature of conflict, and not be dominated by negative emotions such as anger and jealousy. Buddhist conflict resolution emphasizes non-violence (ahimsa), mindfulness, and ethical conduct as tools for transforming personal, social, and political conflicts.

The Buddha proposed reconciliation methods such as dialogue, negotiation, admitting mistakes, and using majority consensus to resolve disputes. Most importantly, he did not use violence but aimed at achieving lasting peace by dispelling hatred and suspicion. Methods such as listening with compassion and using loving speech (loving speech) help to re-establish communication and heal damaged relationships.

**Non-violence and Dialogue:** The Buddha taught that violence fails to resolve conflicts effectively. Instead, dialogue, understanding, and peaceful means are advocated, as illustrated by stories where the Buddha dissuaded violent actions through reasoned discussion.

**Mindfulness and awareness:** Mindfulness is a state of awareness of the present, which is the foundation for developing a deep understanding of the nature of things. Thanks to mindfulness, we can observe and understand clearly the psychological phenomena, emotions, and thoughts happening in each moment, thereby developing wisdom and awareness not dominated by afflictions.<sup>[30]</sup>

**Compassionate Communication:** Active listening and speaking with kindness enable parties in conflict to feel heard and respected, facilitating empathy and mutual understanding.

**Non-Attachment:** Letting go of rigid expectations and the need to be “right” helps conflicting parties remain open to different perspectives and collaborative solutions.

**Moderation (Mattaññutā):** The principle of moderation, or the Middle Way, is applied in conflict resolution to avoid extremes of behavior and thought, aiming to eliminate greed, hatred, and delusion that underlie social conflicts. This principle is integrated into models like CRSA, which combine moral principles, laws, and cultivation of inner and outer peace for effective social conflict resolution

Buddhism also emphasizes that in conflict, there is no real winner because both sides suffer mentally. Therefore, the real victory is the inner victory, overcoming defilements to achieve peace and harmony. In short, Buddhist ethics aims at social justice through equality, compassion, and wisdom, and at the same time resolves conflicts through inner transformation, practicing mindfulness, non-violent dialogue and reconciliation, aiming to build a sustainable, peaceful, and just society.

### **Practical Applications and Contemporary Relevance.**

**Engaged Buddhism:** Modern Buddhist movements, such as those led by Sulak Sivaraksa, actively critique structural violence and promote grassroots economic and social alternatives aligned with Buddhist ethical principles like Right Livelihood. Engaged Buddhism is not only about integrating into social life but also about transforming the individual's body, mind, and the outside world, following the Bodhisattva path, focusing on the philosophy of saving lives. Practitioners of engaged Buddhism must be determined to participate, engage, and act to change society and reduce suffering for sentient beings, not simply practicing or doing social charity. This spirit was encouraged by the ancient Buddhist tradition. Still, in modern times, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh had a big hand in developing it with the idea of "Engaged Buddhism" or "Buddhism in the world", emphasizing the practice of mindfulness and responsible action in social life. Researchers such as Allie B. King and Ken Jones also define Engaged Buddhism as an active, non-violent participation in solving social and environmental problems and an expression of the Buddhist spirit.

**Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Meditation:** Buddhist practices have been incorporated into contemporary conflict resolution techniques, helping individuals and groups cultivate inner peace and moral behavior to foster long-term harmony. MBSR is a structured program based on mindfulness meditation, which is guided meditation with specific goals to reduce stress and improve mental health. Both focus on bringing the mind back to the present moment, recognizing and accepting mental states, thereby decreasing adverse reactions and feelings of anxiety and stress. Meditation is a core practice in the MBSR program, helping practitioners practice mindfulness and deep relaxation skills.

**Teachings of the Social Justice Activism:** it is a perspective and practice based on the Buddha, emphasizing fairness, equality, and the alleviation of suffering in society through actions of compassion, wisdom, and nonviolence.

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<sup>30</sup> “Buddhism And Non-Violence: Exploring The Relationship Between Buddhist Teachings And Conflict Resolution”. By Dr. Kamakhiya Narain Tiwary, Dr. Nirja Sharma

Buddhism inspires social justice activism by merging internal wisdom with external compassionate action, encouraging the fight against inequality and suffering while maintaining inner calm and ethical integrity.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, the Buddhist ethical framework in the Pāli Nikāya scriptures is a profound and multifaceted system that combines philosophical understanding, psychological analysis, and practical methods. It defines ethics not as a rigid set of rules but as a path of inner transformation grounded in a sense of reality. Therefore, this system has both personal value—helping individuals live peacefully and mindfully—and social value—contributing to the building of harmonious and compassionate lives. In the context of the turbulent modern world, this ethical framework remains relevant because it is founded on universal human principles: the desire for happiness, the capacity for understanding, and the potential for transformation.

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