CHAPTER - III

BUDDHIST ETHICS AND MORALITY

Buddhist path way of life:

The Lord Buddha himself was an eminent philosopher. He invoked the feeling of happiness through the *Aṣṭāṅga Mārga* and through four Noble truths called *Ārya Satyās*. The Buddhist philosophy has clearly envisages that man can overcome from his problems by leaving behind the desires in hidden. Buddha raised his voice in protest against superstition and unreason. He laid stress on the values of truth, goodness, and beauty. When the creeds and systems were in a state of disintegration, it was the task of Buddha to provide a firm foundation for morality.

Ancient Buddhism resembles positively in its attempt to shift the centre from the worship of God to the service of man. It was the privilege of Buddha to start a religion independent of dogma and priesthood, sacrifice and sacrament which would insist on an inward change of heart and system of self culture. He made it clear that the attainment of salvation depends upon the perfection of character and devotion to the good but not on the acceptance of doubtful dogmas or indulging in the deeds of darkness.

Radhakrishnan says:
“Buddha does not liberate men, but he teaches them how to liberate themselves as he was liberated himself. He endeavoured to rid himself of all legitimate of speculation build from the raw material of experience and assist the spiritual growth of suffering humanity by an honest and unbiased expression of the results of his thought and experience.”

Depending on spiritual experience Buddha explores the possibilities for the conquest of human suffering and misery. He was convinced of the four noble truths, that there is suffering and it has a cause that it can be removed and that there is a way to accomplish this. The first noble truth is concerning the suffering. Life involves suffering. Birth is painful, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful, union with the unpleasant is painful, separation from the pleasant is painful and any craving that is not satisfied too is painful. Buddha has made an appeal to the men who were longing for a way of escape, to resort to Nirvāṇa, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest. The sublimity and grandeur of Buddha’s teachings could be discerned from the following utterances:

“Never in this world does hatred cease by hatred - hatred ceases by love. Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy. One may conquer a thousand men in battle; but he who conquers himself is the greatest victor. Let man overcome anger by kindness, evil by good not by birth, but by his conduct alone, does a man become a low caste or a Brāhmin.”

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Buddha is humanistic in a sense that it is a religion of love and values. It gave voice to all the inarticulate forces that were working against the established order and the ceremonial religion. It stood for the uplift of poor, the lowly and disinherited. Radhakamal Mukherjee says that:

“Buddhism has shown not only a marked spirit of socialism and humanitarian service for the have-nots but also forbearance, mutual accommodation and co-existence in several regimes and cultures in Asia without reference to its remarkable organizational power.”

Buddhism represented a progressive world outlook and expressed in its own distorted manner the discontent of the oppressed people and their aspirations for social equality and a better life. Dale Riepe says that Buddhism is humanistic since it believes in the ability of the individual to achieve ethical goals in this world without non human aid.

The gospel of the Buddha is sometimes said to be summarized in the following verse of the *Dhammapāda*:

“Not to do any evil (*pāpa*), to cultivate the good (*kuśala*), to purify one’s mind (*citta*); is the teaching of the *Buddhas*.”

It is the fact that for every negative virtue there is corresponding positive one. The terms can be arranged in negative or positive form,

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91 *Dhammapada*, 183.
i.e. one may conquer anger by love (akkodha), but conquer evil (asādhu) by good (sādhu).\[92\]

“An act which is to be opposite to the evil of ānāna has to be, in part at least, positive by nature. The cultivation of each of the four brahma-vihāras serves as an antidote to corresponding evil. By friendliness (metta) malevolence (byāpāda) will be prevented. By sympathetic joy (mudita) aversion (ārati) will be overcome. By equanimity (upekhā) sensory reaction (patigha) will be prevented.”\[93\]

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality. Ethics can be viewed as understanding the foundation and structure of morality regarding how we ought to live.\[94\] The terms “moral” and “ethics” denote the idea of custom. Although these terms have different origins, philosophers use these terms interchangeably. Ethics is defined as systematic understanding of moral concepts and justifies the theories and principles of right behaviour that guides individuals and groups on how to behave in the society. According to Peter Singer:

“An ethical issue is “relevant if it is one that any thinking person must face.”\[95\]

Ethics is not a bunch of principles that everyone should follow in society, rather, ethics guides and allows as a rational agent in society. The interesting fact about ethics is that it is not a scientific study and at

\[92\] Ibid., 223.
\[93\] Majjhima II, pp.104-105.
\[94\] Louis P. Pojman., Environmental Ethics-II, p. VII
\[95\] Peter Albert David Singer., Practical Ethics, p.VII.
the same time even scientific study comes under ethical scrutiny. Ethics is not a scientific study in the sense that there is no scope for proof and demonstration as in science and mathematics. At the same time, ethics can be over and above science for we pass value judgments on scientific discoveries and inventions. The general notion about all areas of knowledge is that if it is not scientific or demonstrable, then there is no use of it. Ethics break this dogma. Even in scientific discipline an ethical orientation becomes inevitable. But that simply does not mean that ethics is a code of prohibitions. In the pre-modern period ethics was in the hands of theologians and they used it as hegemonic tool. It has been rapidly changing in modern times. The scope and definition is being broadened along with modern society. Prominence and importance of ethics is increasing day by day. As no society is static and problems related with it are also not static, ethics is not static and has been addressing ethical issues with different perspectives. Moral philosophers were traditionally engaged in analysing moral semantics and other issues in meta-ethics.

**Buddhist Ethics:**

In the philosophy of the Buddha, we have an analytical study of ethical concepts and theories as well as positive recommendations to lead a way of life. This way of life is considered both possible and desirable because man and the universe are just what they are. It is,
therefore, justified in the light of a realistic account of the nature of the universe and of man’s place in it.

While this way of life in its personal or cosmic dimension, as it were, helps us to attain the highest Good, if not in this very life, at least, in some subsequent life, it also has a social dimension insofar as it helps the achievement of “the well-being and happiness of the multitude or of mankind as a whole” (bahujana-hita-bahujana-sukha). The well-being mankind is another end considered to be of supreme, though relative, value in the Buddhist texts and this well-being and happiness is conceived of as both material and spiritual welfare.

Buddhist ethics, therefore, has a close connection with a social philosophy as well. This social philosophy is also fully developed. We have in the Buddhist texts an account of the nature and origin of society and the causes of social change. There is also an account of the nature and functions of government, the form of the ideal social order and how it is likely to be brought about.

Buddhist ethics are not arbitrary standards invented by man for his own utilitarian purpose. Nor are they arbitrarily imposed from without. Man-made laws and social customs do not form the basis of Buddhist ethics. For example, the styles of dress that are suitable for one climate, period or civilization may be considered indecent in another; but this is entirely a matter of social custom and does not in any
way involve ethical considerations. Yet the artificialities of social conventions are continually confused with ethical principles that are valid and unchanging.

Buddhist ethics finds its foundation not on the changing social customs but rather on the unchanging laws of nature. Buddhist ethical values are intrinsically a part of nature, and the unchanging law of cause and effect (karma). The simple fact that Buddhist ethics are rooted in natural law makes its principles both useful and acceptable to the modern world. The fact that the Buddhist ethical code was formulated over 2,500 years ago does not detract from its timeless character.  

Morality in Buddhism is essentially practical in that it is only a means leading to the final goal of ultimate happiness. On the Buddhist path to emancipation, each individual is considered responsible for his own fortunes and misfortunes. Each individual is expected to work his own deliverance by his understanding and effort. Buddhist salvation is the result of one's own moral development and can neither be imposed nor granted to one by some external agent. The Buddha's mission was to enlighten men as to the nature of existence and to advise them how best to act for their own happiness and for the benefit of others. Consequently, Buddhist ethics are not founded on any commandments which men are compelled to follow. Dharmasiri Gunapala writes:

96 Dharmasiri Gunapala., Fundamentals of Buddhists Ethics, p. 27.
“The Buddha advised men on the conditions which were most wholesome and conducive to long term benefit for self and others. Rather than addressing sinners with such words as 'shameful', 'wicked', 'wretched', 'unworthy', and 'blasphemous' He would merely say, 'You are unwise in acting in such a way since this will bring sorrow upon yourselves and others.”

The theory of Buddhist ethics finds its practical expression in the various precepts. These precepts or disciplines are nothing but general guides to show the direction in which the Buddhist ought to turn to on his way to final salvation. Although many of these precepts are expressed in a negative form, we must not think that Buddhist morality, consists of abstaining from evil without the complement of doing good.

Śīla (Sanskrit) is usually translated into English as "virtuous behavior", "morality", "ethics" or "precept". It is an action committed through the body, speech, or mind, and involves an intentional effort. It is one of the three practices (śīla, samādhi, and panya) and the second pāramitā. It refers to moral purity of thought, word, and deed. The four conditions of śīla are chastity, calmness, quiet, and extinguishment.

Śīla is the foundation of Samādhi or Bhāvana (Meditative cultivation) or mind cultivation. Keeping the precepts promotes not only the peace of mind of the cultivator, which is internal, but also peace in the community, which is external. According to the Law of Karma, keeping the precepts are meritorious and it acts as causes which would

97 Ibid.
bring about peaceful and happy effects. Keeping these precepts keeps the cultivator from rebirth in the four woeful realms of existence.98

Śīla refers to overall principles of ethical behavior. There are several levels of śīla, which correspond to "basic morality" (five precepts), "basic morality with asceticism" (eight precepts), "novice monkhood" (ten precepts) and "monkhood" (Vinaya or Patimokkha). Lay people generally undertake to live by the five precepts, which are common to all Buddhist schools. If they wish, they can choose to undertake the eight precepts, which add basic asceticism. The five precepts are training rules in order to live a better life in which one is happy, without worries, and can meditate well to refrain from taking life (non-violence towards sentient life forms), to refrain from taking that which is not given (not committing theft), to refrain from sensual (including sexual misconduct), to refrain from lying (speaking truth always) and to refrain from intoxicants which lead to loss of mindfulness (specifically, drugs and alcohol). The precepts are not formulated as imperatives, but as training rules those laypeople undertake voluntarily to facilitate practice.99

In Buddhist thought, the cultivation of dāna and ethical conduct will themselves refine consciousness to such a level that rebirth in one of the lower heavens is likely, even if there is no further Buddhist

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98 Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, p. 186.
99 Peter Harvey, An Introduction to Buddhism, p. 187.
practice. There is nothing improper or un-Buddhist about limiting one’s aims to this level of attainment. In the eight precepts, the third precept on sexual misconduct is made stricter, and becomes a precept of celibacy. The three additional precepts are:

1. To refrain from eating at the wrong time (only eat from sunrise to noon)
2. To refrain from dancing and playing music, wearing jewelry and cosmetics, attending shows and other performances.
3. To refrain from using high or luxurious seats and bedding.

**Meditation:**

Buddhist meditation is fundamentally concerned with two themes: transforming the mind and using it to explore it and other phenomena. According to *Theravāda Buddhism* the Buddha taught two types of meditation, *samatha* meditation (Sanskrit: śamatha) and *vipassanā* meditation (Sanskrit: vipaśyanā). In Chinese Buddhism, these exist (translated *chih kuan*), but Chan (Zen) meditation is more popular. According to Peter Harvey:

“Whenever Buddhism has been healthy, not only monks, nuns, and married lamas, but also more committed lay people have practiced meditation.”

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100 Ibid., p. 195-196.
102 Welch., *Practice of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 396.
103 Peter Harvey., *An Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 144.
According to Routledge’s *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, in contrast, throughout most of Buddhist history before modern times, serious meditation by lay people has been unusual.¹⁰⁴ Sarah Shaw pointed out:

“The evidence of the early texts suggests that at the time of the Buddha, many male and female lay practitioners did practice meditation, some even to the point of proficiency in all eight *jhānas*.”¹⁰⁵

**Ascetic practices:**

Long before Buddha appeared into this world, there existed ascetic practices designed for oppressing the body in as variegated as numerous ways. Those who adopted them believed that they would enable them to get liberated from the sorrow any living being. On the other hand, others were convinced that the ultimate goal of existence lied in knowing how to enjoy it to the full and focused all their efforts on best enjoying sensuous pleasures.

From his very first teaching, Buddha categorically rejected these two paths that he qualified of extreme paths. In this teaching, he explains us that only the moderate path, the middle path, can lead us to the development of wisdom and right knowledge of reality. The two extreme paths develop, on their behalf, attachments and false views,

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¹⁰⁴ Damien Keown, Charles S. Prebish., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, p.502
¹⁰⁵ Sarah Shaw., *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from the Pāli Canon*, p.13.
contrary to the moderate path, which enables the lessening of attachments and the development of right view.

Ascetics practiced many forms of self-denial, including severe under eating. One day, after almost starving to death, Gautama accepted a little milk and rice from a village girl named Sujata. After this experience, he concluded that ascetic practices such as fasting, holding one's breath, and exposure to pain brought little spiritual benefit. He viewed them as counterproductive due to their reliance on self-hatred and mortification. He abandoned asceticism, concentrating instead on ānapānasati meditation (awareness of breathing), thereby discovering what Buddhists call the Middle Way, a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification.\(^{106}\)

**Vegetarianism and Diet:**

In certain countries, the followers of the *Mahāyāna* school of Buddhism are strict vegetarians. While appreciating their observance in the name of religion, we should like to point out that they should not condemn those who are not vegetarians. They must remember that there is no precept in the original teachings of the Buddha that requires all Buddhists to be vegetarians. We must realize that Buddhism is known as the Middle Path. It is a liberal religion and the Buddha’s advice was that it is not necessary to go to extremes to practice his teachings.

Vegetarianism alone does not help a man to cultivate his humane qualities. There are kind, humble, polite and religious people amongst non-vegetarians. Therefore, one should not condone the statement that a pure, religious man must practice vegetarianism. On the other hand, if anybody thinks that people cannot have a healthy life without taking fish and meat, it does not necessarily follow that they are correct since there are millions of pure vegetarians all over the world who are stronger and healthier than the meat-eaters. Taking fish and meat by itself does not make a man become impure. A man makes himself impure by bigotry, deceit, envy, self-exaltation. Regarding Buddha’s diet, Ferdinand Herold mentioned an incident that occurred in Buddha’s life:

“The Buddha (The Master) and his disciples stopped at Pava, in the garden of Cunda, the blacksmith. Cunda came and paid homage to the Master, and said to him:

"My Lord, do me the honor of taking your meal at my home, to-morrow."
The Master accepted. The next day, Cunda had pork and other delicacies prepared for his guests. They arrived and took their seats. When the Master saw the pork, he pointed to it and said:

"No one but me could eat that, Cunda, you must keep it for me. My disciples will partake of the other delicacies."

When he had eaten, he said:
"Bury deep in the ground what I have left untouched; the Buddha alone can eat of such meat."

Then he left. The disciples followed.

They had gone only a short distance from Pava when the Master began to feel weary and sick. Ananda grieved, and he cursed Cunda, the blacksmith, for having offered the Master this fatal meal.

"Ananda," said the Master, "do not be angry."

Buddhists prefer to abstain from eating meat, since this involves the killing of living beings, although, even for the monks and nuns, there is no rule forbidding eating of meat, unless the monk or nun, who is provided with a meal by a layperson, knows that the animal has been specially killed for the occasion.

One day General Siha, a disciple of the Jains, invited the Buddha to a meal with him and asked a man to go and find out if there was meat (pavattamansa, i.e. what had been already killed, but not killed on purpose or specially for a meal for a monk) to hand. General Siha served and satisfied the order of monks with the Buddha. When the Buddha had roused, rejoiced, gladdened, delighted General Siha with talk on Dhamma, Buddha addressed the monks, saying:

“Monks, one should not knowingly make use of meat killed on purpose for one. Whoever should make use of it, there is an offence of

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wrong-doing. I allow you, monks, fish and meat that are quite pure in these respects: if they have not been seen, heard or suspected (to have been killed on purpose for a monk).  

On Fasting From a Buddhist's Perspective:

Devout Buddhist monks, in some traditions, live in communities that observe strict rules designed to focus attention on the Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path. In some cases food is only consumed in the morning, before noon, and fasting is practiced from noon until the following morning. In other communities and retreat centers fasting may be practiced for different lengths of time. Often these are water fasts that can last numerous days or even many weeks. This is done, along with other measures, to serve as an opportunity to sharply focus on align oneself with the Buddhist path in a way that can not be done in normal, everyday life. According to S.B. Roy:

“Regarding the "Buddhist" approach to fasting, there are many, many different approaches and practices. Fasting in the monastic community is considered an ascetic practice, a "dhutāygas" practice. (dhutāyga means "to shake up" or "invigoration.") dhutāygas are a specific list of thirteen practices, five of which pertain to food: eating once a day, eating at one sitting, reducing the amount you eat, on alms-round, eating extra meal, eating only the food that you receive at the first seven houses.”

These practices are adopted by individuals voluntarily. They are not required in the normal course of a Buddhist monastic’s life of

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practice. The Buddha, as is well known, emphasized moderation, the Middle Way that avoids extremes, in all things. Fasting is an additional method that one can take up, with supervision, for a time.

The Dhutaýgas.\(^{110}\)

There exist thirteen ascetic practices: two for the robes, five for the food, five for the spot of residence, and one for the posture (known to be the dhutaýga of effort). paµsukūla: abandonne​d robes.

Religious Significance of Fasting:

The ancient religious traditions of early Brahmanism no longer fitted the needs of society and of individuals. Therefore, many left society to find new religious ways, mostly by practicing asceticism. The Buddha was one of them. The Buddha used traditional ascetic practices including a very strict fast, reducing his intake of food to a few drops of bean soup a day. This starvation almost killed him, and he became aware of the fact that the body should not be ignored to arrive at man's spiritual core, but should be supported in a healthy and moderate way: no consciousness without a body; no experience of liberation or nirvāṇa without a body. After his "awakening" (bodhi) he formulated his "middle path," holding the middle between extreme asceticism and indulgence. This is the reason why fasting and abstinence in Buddhism are always placed within the context of the middle path.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., p.235.
Sages in various countries who practiced self-control began with a system of regulated fasting and succeeded in attaining unbelievable heights of spirituality. An ascetic was kicked and tortured, and then his hands and feet were severed on the orders of a rakish king. But the ascetic, according to the Buddhist story, endured the torture with equanimity and without the slightest anger or hatred. Such religious people have developed their mental power through restraining from sensual indulgence.

In Buddhism, fasting is recognized as one of the methods for practicing self-control. The Buddha advised monks not to take solid food after noon. Lay people who observe the eight precepts on full moon days also abstain from taking any solid food after noon:

“\[quote\]In Buddhism, fasting is an initial stage of self-discipline to acquire self-control. In every religion, there is a system of fasting. By fasting and sacrificing a meal once a day or for any period, we can contribute our food to those who are starving or who do not have even a proper meal each day.\[quote\]”

The Buddha’s spiritual awakening is directly related to fasting, but from the reverse. That is to say, only after the Buddha stopped fasting did he realize his mahābodhi, or great awakening. The founding story of the Buddhist faith relates how the Buddha was cultivating the way in the Himalayas, having left his affluent life as a Prince of India. He sought teachers and investigated a variety of practices in his search for

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liberation from the suffering of old age, death and rebirth. In the course of his practices he realized that desire was the root of mortality. He determined, incorrectly, that if he stopped eating he could end desire and gain liberation from suffering. As the story goes, he ate only a grain of rice and a sesame seed per day. Over time he got so thin that he could touch his spine by pressing on his stomach. He no longer had the strength to meditate. He realized that he would die before he understood his mind; further, that desire does not end by force. So by quitting fasting, and eating in moderation, he realized the central tenet of Buddhist practice, moderation.\(^{112}\)

The Chinese word "zhai" or "zai" means "vegetarian" as well as "fasting." The point is that removing the meat from one's diet, twice a month on the new or full moon days, or six times a month, or more often, is often considered already a kind of fasting. The principle holds that removing indulgences from the diet, in this case, nutrients that are luxuries eaten to satisfy the desire for flavor, is already a form of fasting, and brings merit to the one who fasts. For monastic, it's a different story. David Pramod points out:

"Fasting, because it is a difficult practice, is undertaken with supervision, under the guidance of a skilled mentor. Children rarely fast in any method connected with the Buddhist religion."\(^{113}\)

\(^{112}\) David Pramod., Religious Practices in India, p. 34.
\(^{113}\) Ibid., p. 35.
When a practitioner adopts a supervised fasting practice he or she eats dry bread for three days to prepare the stomach for no food. The standard fasting period is eighteen days and only a small amount of water is drunk daily. Most important is the ending of the fast, which requires small portions of thin porridge or gruel every few hours for three days, until the digestive system has come fully back to life. If this first fast is successful and beneficial to one's practice, then one can attempt a thirty-six day fast. Some fasters have extended the period gradually over years to include fasting for up to seventy-two days. This is an extreme practice that is only recommended to one who has taken all the required steps with the supervision of an experienced teacher.  

To understand how Mahāyāna Buddhists practice fasting, it helps to understand their daily practices regarding food. Many Buddhists are vegetarians, but not all, by any means. This comes as a surprise to many people who assume that Buddhists, being motivated by great compassion, would not eat the flesh of living beings. This issue has traditionally provoked debate among Buddhists. Chinese and Vietnamese Buddhists from the Mahāyāna or Northern tradition are strict vegetarians. This tradition avoids the five pungent plants (onions, garlic, shallots, leeks and chives) as well as eggs, and of course, alcohol and tobacco in any form. Avoiding dairy, and following a vegan diet is a personal option and not a requirement. Some Buddhists eat

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only once per day, before noon. This practice accords with an account in The *Sūtra In 42 Sections*, a *Mahāyāna* Scripture that relates how the Buddha ate one meal a day, before noon. Gokul Sharma pointed out:

“Fasting is not for everybody. The analogy is given of a car. Without gasoline in the tank, the car won't carry you down the road. Folks who function in the world of the marketplace need nutrition to carry on business. Certainly over-eating and under-eating both defeat the purpose of food, which is to nourish the body and keep us healthy so that we can work to benefit the world.”

Laity who receive and observe the vows known as the Lay *Bodhisattva Precepts* stop eating at noon on six days of each month. The purpose of their limiting food intake is manifold: out of compassion for those suffering from starvation, they "give by reducing their share." Further, they respect the Buddha's practice of moderation and eat less on those days. The fasting observance is related to several liturgical practices observed on the six fasting days. They recite their precept codes, recite scriptures and increase their hours of meditation on those days.

**Reasons for Buddhists fast:**

One should not judge the purity or impurity of man simply by observing what he eats. The Buddha said:

>'Neither meat, nor fasting, nor nakedness,
Nor shaven heads, nor matted hair, nor dirt,

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115 Gokul Sharma., *Ethics in Early Buddhism*, p. 110.
Nor rough skins, nor fire-worshipping,
Nor all the penances here in this world,
Nor hymns, nor oblation, nor sacrifice,
Nor feasts of the season,
Will purify a man overcome with doubt.¹¹⁶

Some Buddhist laity feels that eating low on the food chain creates merit; eating less luxurious food creates an opportunity to serve the planet and all living beings. In this way the dining table becomes a place of practice. Buddhist monastics who adopt the fasting practice described above do so by and large to purify their bodies and to clarify their thoughts. Fasting allows coarse thoughts to diminish, but strength also diminishes, so there is a trade-off between mental clarity and reduced ability to meditate as long. Some monastics report that the longer they fast, the more strength they have; so not everybody’s experience is the same.

The Buddha’s own experience showed him that fasting per se did not extinguish desire, it only subdued it. As soon as he resumed eating, his desire returned as well. It took concentration and insight to extinguish desire. The Buddha discovered that desire is rooted in the mind and can be transformed in the mind. Fasting can help that process of transforming desire to wisdom by subduing the body’s coarse desires. Fasting is an aid to the Way, a supplementary practice that can lead to increased mental awareness of the connection between desire and human existence. Moreover fasting highlights one’s attachments to food

and to good flavor. Thus it helps the practitioner to distinguish how much of his or her craving for food is need, and therefore normal and necessary, and how much is greed, and therefore a hindrance to liberation.

Monks from the Theravāda tradition hold that it is necessary to accept without exception whatever the lay donors put in their alms bowls. If the donation includes meat, many Theravada monks will eat it, regardless. Mahayāna monks and nuns feel that compassion should be the priority and it is a monk's duty to inform the laity that meat eating breaks the precept against killing. Killing obviously involves suffering in the animal killed for food; at the same time it harms the seeds of compassion in the heart of the one who kills or eats the animal's body. This principle informs the monastic's approach towards the alms that he or she accepts from laity.\footnote{Gokul Sharma., \textit{Ethics in Early Buddhism}, p. 112.}

All the main branches of Buddhism practice some periods of fasting, usually on full-moon days and other holidays. Depending on the Buddhist tradition, fasting usually means abstaining from solid food, with some liquids permitted, a method of purification. Theravadin and Tendai Buddhist monks fast as a means of freeing the mind. Some Tibetan Buddhist monks fast to aid yogic feats, like generating inner heat.
According to the monastic rules, the *Vinaya*, monks and nuns should have only two meals a day, in the early morning and before noon, and abstain from food for the rest of the day. One of the reasons is that meditation practice is considered to be difficult if the stomach is full. On festive days, especially at full and new moon, and during meditation retreats, laypeople regularly follow those rules too. In lay Buddhist practice, the Hindu custom of sharing "sanctified" food or *prasāda*, food that is pure (no meat or sharp spices) and has been offered to monks and nuns or to statues of the Buddha or Buddhist deities, is also followed.

In the Buddhist practices of the *Newars* in the *Kathmandu Valley*, one finds observances, *vrata*, similar to those of the Hindus, in which fasting takes a prominent role. For example, in the observances connected with full and new moon, but also in those directed to a specific deity. On the eighth day after full moon the fasting is held to honor the bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara-Lokeśvara*, the embodiment of compassion. During public or private ritual performances fasting is observed to maintain purity. And, similar to the Hindu custom, an observance is also a way to achieve a specific spiritual or material goal. Some examples include the fasting for *Lokeśvara*, which is supposed to cause the birth of a son; a fast for *Tārā*, which frees one from illness, dangers, pain, and untimely death; a fast for *Hārītī* protects against smallpox; and other deities are invoked by following rules of purity,
including abstaining from sex, and fasting for good jobs, before an exam, or before going on a journey.\textsuperscript{118}

The Buddha used traditional ascetic practices including a very strict fast, reducing his intake of food to a few drops of bean soup a day. This starvation almost killed him, and he became aware of the fact that the body should not be ignored to arrive at man’s spiritual core, but should be supported in a healthy and moderate way. No consciousness without a body, no experience of liberation or nirvāṇa without a body. After his "awakening" (bodhi) he formulated his "middle path," holding the middle between extreme asceticism and indulgence. This is the reason why fasting and abstinence in Buddhism are always placed within the context of the middle path.

**Traditional moral values:**

Criteria of rationality laid down in the methods of modern science and the materialist outlook associated with it, are the most dominant influences on the intellectual life of modern man. A large section of modern intellectuals have rejected metaphysics and dogmatic religion along with a host of traditional moral values. Scientific rationality has undoubtedly resulted in tremendous material progress. It cannot, however, be claimed that human beings in the modern world live more contented lives, feeling safe and secure, and that their interests will not

\textsuperscript{118} David Pramod., *Religious Practices in India*, p. 52.
be unjustly harmed by fellow human beings. Armed conflicts are rampant in the modern world. Acts of terrorism, violation of human rights, racial and other types of discrimination, violence against innocent human beings are some of the horrendous moral crimes that we frequently witness in many parts of the world. Poverty and destitution are not uncommon.\textsuperscript{119}

In Buddhist terms, scientific and technological progress has in no way resulted in the reduction of the unwholesome roots of human behaviour, namely, greed, hatred and delusion. As long as these roots of unwholesome behaviour are not drastically reduced or are kept within reasonable limits, it would not be possible to think of peace, harmony, happiness and contentment in society. Goyal says:

\textit{“The relevance of Buddhism to the modern social context lies in the fact that it offers a philosophical middle way that recognizes in principle the norms of scientific rationality, while rejecting both the extreme materialist world-view of modern science and the metaphysical and dogmatic fundamentalism of traditional religion.”}\textsuperscript{120}

Modern science does not provide us with the knowledge of what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. When human beings are not concerned with such knowledge, and do not care to pursue the principles of a morally good life, social interaction among humans is not likely to become very different from that among brutes. One of the most

\textsuperscript{119} Goyal, \textit{Buddhism to the Modern World}, p. 36.
\textsuperscript{120} Goyal, \textit{Buddhism to the Modern World}, p. 37.
important features that distinguish life among humans from life among brutes is that human beings desire not only to live, but also to live well. They search for meaning in life, and seek to attain rationally justifiable moral ideals and goals. In this respect Buddhist morality has much to offer to modern man.

Buddhism can be considered as a path of moral perfection. The entire path is comprised of gradual stages of ethical purification. This is the reason why it was traditionally described as a *visuddhimagga*. The goal of Buddhism is a modification of a person’s behaviour and a transformation of a person’s emotive and cognitive constitution. The consequence of this modification and transformation is that the person concerned overcomes the ills of existence and ceases to produce suffering to others. The goal of Buddhism is defined purely in psychological terms. It is not merging with God or Brahman or surviving to eternity in some incomprehensible realm of Being, but becoming free from greed, hatred and delusion.\(^{121}\)

**The Ethical teachings of Buddhism:**

The ethical teaching of Buddhism advocates an ideal of moral perfection as its ultimate goal. Moral perfection is attained when the unwholesome psychological roots of human behaviour, namely, greed, hatred and delusion are eradicated. They are described as unwholesome roots (*akusalamula*) because it is through their influence

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\(^{121}\) Goyal, *Buddhism to the Modern World*, p. 38.
that people are motivated to commit unethical acts such as destruction of life, causing harm or injury to other living beings, misappropriation of the belongings of others, indulgence in sexual misconduct and the wrongful enjoyment of sense pleasures, the use of false, harsh, frivolous and slanderous speech, etc. Buddhism recognizes a valid basis for the distinctions people make between what is morally right or wrong and good or bad. Narada Maha Tehra says:

“The significance of Buddhism to modern society is that it does not seek to determine the issue of what is right and wrong by tying the moral life to a set of metaphysical dogmas from which moral precepts are derived, or to the moral commandments of a sectarian God.”

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According to the Buddhist teachings, a valid basis for making moral judgments has to be discovered with reference to human experience, but not with reference to any metaphysical reality. The conditions under which human beings become happy and contented and the conditions under which they find life miserable are generally the same. Factual information about those conditions are directly relevant to our moral life. They are to be discovered by means of observation and experience. To live morally is to live, paying due regard to the moral point of view which involves the avoidance of the creation of misery to oneself and others as well as the alleviation of the suffering of others. As long as people pay attention to human experience itself they need not lose faith in the importance of morality. To be concerned with,

122 Narada Maha Tehra., *The Buddha and His Teachings*, p. 72.
morality is to be concerned with human good and harm, happiness and unhappiness, ill and well-being.\textsuperscript{123}

People who have given up metaphysics and religious dogma in preference to the modern scientific, materialist and deterministic view of existence have moved towards a sceptical stance on the nature of moral values. They tend to associate morality with metaphysics and religion. The consequence of this attitude is the creation of a moral vacuum in their lives. Under such circumstances greed, hatred and delusion become the motivating forces of their behaviour.

The materialist and determinist ideology associated with modern science, which is seeking to displace metaphysics and religious dogma, attempts to transform society by effecting changes in the material conditions of living. The scientific world-view attaches no significance to the importance of morality. Morality is considered as a matter of attitudes and emotions. Moral values are considered to be relative and subjective. According to this view, only empirical facts have objectivity. Man is considered merely as a stimulus-response mechanism. Man’s capacity to understand and control the inner motivational roots of behaviour appears to gain little recognition in terms of the mechanistic world view of material science. Human behaviour is explained in terms of the external conditions that determine it. If external factors alone determine human behaviour, people cannot be responsible for their

moral failings. They cannot be blamed for what they do. Such a view of the nature of human action encourages the renunciation of personal responsibility for what people do.\textsuperscript{124}

The problems of modern society may be explained from the Buddhist standpoint as a consequence of the separation of scientific knowledge and technological skill from moral wisdom. There is ample evidence of the proliferation of greed and hatred at all levels of social interaction in modern society. It has created economic disparity, poverty and destitution. The lack of concern for the cultivation of sympathetic concern for the well-being of others is leading to increased social conflict and tension. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist way of life is the eradication of greed, hatred and delusion. If much of the psychological insanity that produces moral crises in modern society, it is the consequence of the proliferation of greed, hatred and delusion, then the Buddhist ideal of moral perfection can be said to be directly relevant to the social life of modern man.\textsuperscript{125}

"The strongest motivation for accepting the doctrine of rebirth was to support the notion that people are accountable for their actions to the very end of their lives. The doctrine thus plays a central role in Buddhist ethical theory."\textsuperscript{126}

It was noted that the Buddhist view of the person was described as a middle path between two equally untenable extremes. In the realm

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\textsuperscript{124} Suhrullekha, Quarterly Journal, October, December, 2001. p.3.
\textsuperscript{125} Suhrullekha, Quarterly Journal, April - June, 1999. p.11.
\textsuperscript{126} Lella Karun Yakara., \textit{Modernization of Buddhism}, p. 24.
\end{flushleft}
of conduct also, the Buddhists described theirs as a middle path or a moderate position that avoided extreme views of human conduct. In order to understand the various positions against which the Buddhists defined their views on appropriate conduct, it should be borne in mind that the central question being asked by the Buddha and his contemporaries was how to achieve contentment. The strategies recommended by different thinkers were closely related to their views of life after death. P.N. Chopra pointed out:

“Those who held that a person has only one life, tended to argue, that one’s life should be spent in the pursuit of as much pleasure as is possible without bringing pain and injury to oneself. Restraint in the pursuit of pleasure was seen as necessary only to the extent that excessive indulgence might shorten one’s life and decrease one’s opportunities for future pleasure seeking.”

Philosophers who accepted the doctrine of rebirth, on the other hand, tended to argue that the only kind of happiness worth pursuing was lasting freedom from the pains and turmoil of life. This could be won only by bringing rebirth to an end. After death, they said, all living beings are eventually reborn in a form of life determined by the accumulated effects of deeds done in previous lives. Although some forms of life might be very pleasant and offer a temporary reward for previous good actions, every form of life involves some amount of pain and suffering, even if it is only an anxiety that one’s present peace and happiness will

127 Chopra, P.N., *Contribution of Buddhism to World Civilization*, p. 45.
eventually come to an end and be replaced by more direct forms of physical and mental pain.

Therefore, the only hope of any lasting freedom from the pains of existence is to remove oneself from the cycle of birth and death altogether. Exactly how this was to be achieved was a matter of much controversy, but some drastic methods involved undergoing extreme forms of austerity and even self-inflicted pain. The Buddhist middle path, therefore, was one that avoided two extremes: one extreme was the self-indulgence of those who denied life after death altogether, and the other was the self-torture recommended by some ascetics, as the only way to gain freedom.

Buddhist philosophers tended to agree that a person’s mentality at any given moment is virtuous, vicious or neutral. This means that all of one’s mental characteristics in a given moment have the same orientation, which is either towards a state of happiness, the natural consequence of virtue, or towards a state of discontent, the natural consequence of vice. The principal virtues that were said to cooperate in a healthy mentality were correct understanding, which manifested itself as a sense of shame, and a sense of decency, usually interpreted as respect for oneself and respect for others.

Thus if one has the virtue of having a sense of shame, then while that sense of shame is functioning, one will also have the virtues of
being generous, free of malice and open-minded; having these virtues makes one likely to behave in ways that conduce to the health of oneself and others. If, on the other hand, one has the vice of being shameless, then one will also have the vices of being deluded and agitated and therefore prone to behave in ways likely to bring harm to oneself and others. While virtuous and vicious mental qualities cannot be present in the same mentality at the same moment, it could very well be that a person vacillates between virtuous and vicious frames of mind. Indeed, this is said to be the condition of the vast majority of living beings.\textsuperscript{128}

Despite a tendency to agree on these basic matters, Buddhist philosophers disagreed with one another over several other questions. There was, for example, controversy over whether people could arrive at stages of attainment from which they could never backslide. Some argued that once people gained certain insights into reality, then they could no longer be deluded in the ways that result in acting on self-centered motivations. Others argued that, even if backsliding might be unlikely for some people, it is in principle always possible, and therefore a person can never afford to be complacent.

Another controversy arose over whether a vicious person could be fully aware of a virtuous person’s virtues, some Buddhists holding the view that only a virtuous person can recognize that another person is

\textsuperscript{128} Suhrulekha, Quarterly Journal, April - June, 1999. p.12.
also virtuous. Yet another matter of controversy had to do with whether
the merit of being virtuous could be transferred to others. Some argued
that each person is strictly accountable for their own actions and that no
one can escape the ill effects of their intentionally harmful actions.
Others claimed that merit can be transferred to others, enabling them to
experience levels of happiness that they could never have deserved on
the merit of their own actions. Closely tied to this controversy was the
question mentioned above, concerning whether some beings fall into
such states of depravity that they can no longer even aspire to be good.

Those philosophers who accepted that beings could become
depraved to this extent but denied that merit can be transferred had to
conclude that some beings would never attain nirvāṇa. Other
philosophers, for whom the prospect of eternal suffering in the cycle of
birth seemed unjust, favoured the doctrine that merit could be
transferred, thus enabling these thoroughly depraved beings to undergo
the change of mentality necessary to begin leading a life of virtue. P.N.
Chopra writes:

“Buddhism is religion, philosophy, psychology, science and way of life. It is not concerned
with god, soul, and sin theories but with morality and nature. It preaches that the world
is not created by supernatural being but evolving continuously as per the law of cause
and effect. However, it tells us that there are divine beings in the Universe.”

Today Buddhism remains as a great civilizing force in the modern world. Buddhism awakens the self-respect and feeling self-responsibility of countless people and stirs up the energy of many a nation. Buddhism has satisfied the spiritual needs of many.

**Buddhist ethics are based on intention or volition:**

'Kamma is volition,' says the Buddha. Action themselves are considered as neither good nor bad but 'only the intention and thought makes them so.' Yet Buddhist ethics does not maintain that a person may commit what are conventionally regarded as 'sins' provided that he does so with the best of intentions. S.B. Roy writes:

“Had this been its position, Buddhism would have confined itself to questions of psychology and left the uninteresting task of drawing up lists of ethical rules and framing codes of conducts to less emancipated teachings.”

The connection between thoughts and deeds, between mental and material action is an extension of thought. It is not possible to commit murder with a good heart because taking of life is simply the outward expression of a state of mind dominated by hate or greed. Deeds are condensations of thoughts just as rain is a condensation of vapor. Deeds proclaim from the rooftops of action only what has already been committed in the silent and secret chambers of the heart.

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129 Chopra, P.N., *Contribution of Buddhism to World Civilization*, p. 72.
A person who commits an immoral act thereby declares that he is not free from unwholesome states of mind. Also, a person who has a purified and radiant mind, who has a mind empty of all defiled thoughts and feelings, is incapable of committing immoral actions. Buddhist ethics also recognizes the objectivity of moral value. In other words, the kammic consequences of actions occur in accordance with natural kammic law, regardless of the attitude of the individual or regardless of social attitudes toward the act. For example, drunkenness has kammic consequences; it is evil since it promotes one's own unhappiness as well as the unhappiness of others. The kammic effects of drunkenness exist despite what the drunkard or his society may think about the habit of drinking.

The prevailing opinions and attitudes do not in the least detract from the fact that drunkenness is objectively evil. The consequences, psychological, social, and kammic, make actions moral or immoral, regardless of the mental attitudes of those judging the act. Thus while ethical relativism is recognized, it is not considered as undermining the objectivity of values.