

A Study of Moral Consciousness: Wholesome and Unwholesome States

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ABSTRACT

Based on the Noble Eightfold Path (*Ariya Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*), this study explores moral consciousness using the Buddhist paradigm of wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) states. The Noble Eightfold Path provides a comprehensive method of ethical, mental, and intellectual expansion through eight factors: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Traditionally, these eight factors are arranged as the threefold training of moral discipline (*sīla*), mental concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Moral discipline, comprising right speech, right action, and right livelihood, restrains unwholesome physical and verbal actions and establishes the foundation for moral conduct. Mental concentration, consisting of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration, cultivates mental discipline and strengthens the mind against the arising of unwholesome states. Wisdom, symbolised by right view and right intention, helps the practitioner discern between wholesome and unwholesome mental states and advances awareness of the nature of reality. The study also examines how the main sources of unwholesome consciousness are greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), whereas the main sources of wholesome consciousness are non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. It makes the case that the Noble Eightfold Path offers a comprehensive strategy for controlling, weakening, and eventually defeating impurities via moral behaviour, wisdom, and mental development. Therefore, the Noble Eightfold Path's cultivation of moral discipline, mental concentration, and wisdom represents a progressive process of mental growth and moral purity.

Keywords: unwholesome, wholesome, moral, concentration, wisdom, Noble Eightfold Path.

INTRODUCTION

According to humanistic philosophy, wholesome consciousness is a clear, compassionate state of consciousness devoid of greed, hatred, and ignorance. It is focused on improving society via regular deeds of kindness, generosity, and social interaction rather than being self-serving. In ethics, moral importance is based on the mental lives of living things, and moral judgements are primarily based on mental acts. Such mental acts can be categorized as either morally good or morally bad, or wholesome (*Sanskrit: kuśala*) or unwholesome (*akuśala*). Wholesome consciousness is typically defined in philosophical and psychological literature as a clear, moral, and optimistic mental state devoid of harmful or unpleasant thoughts. It is demonstrated by inner serenity, kindness, honesty, and truthfulness and entails an understanding of right and wrong.¹

¹ P. A. Payutto, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching*, trans. Bruce Evans (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993), pp. 19-20.

On the other hand, the three unwholesome roots—greed, hatred, and delusion—are the source of unwholesome consciousness. Selfishness, rage, jealousy, cruelty, attachment, and ignorance are the results of these mental vices. Unwholesome consciousness causes people to act in ways that cause misery for both themselves and other people. These unwholesome mental states are frequently the root cause of social issues like exploitation, prejudice, violence, and corruption. Unwholesome consciousness obscures wisdom and keeps people from seeing the genuine nature of reality, according to Buddhist ethics.² Even though the wholesome and unwholesome are distinct mental states, their effects and manifestations have significant societal implications. Every member of society has an innate desire to defend themselves, their loved ones, their property, their security, and their freedom against the greed, hatred, and delusion of others. However, even though one may not be conscious of or concerned about these consequences, one's own greed, hatred, and delusion may cause tension, resentment, and concern in others. This leads to a complex web of suffering, both one's own suffering and the suffering of others. Because of this, the Buddha frequently emphasized that the unwholesome are harmful to oneself and others, while the wholesome are beneficial to society as a whole.³

At every stage of human life, the wholesome and unwholesome are crucial. They are the driving factors behind our actions, words, and thoughts because they are the initial causes of volitional action (*kamma*), our deliberate deeds that affirm life and result in reincarnation. They determine the nature of our rebirth by moulding our destiny and character. The *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* uses the unwholesome as major factors in the formation of the mind to categorise unwholesome awareness and create a typology of human experience. The wholesome and unwholesome are important to every phase of the emancipation journey. At the start of the road, virtue (*sīla*) must be cultivated to give up the most primitive types of greed, hatred, and delusion. The more advanced levels use concentration (*samādhi*) and knowledge (*paññā*) to promote the wholesome and eliminate the unwholesome. These phrases are used to explain even *Arahantship*, the attainment of complete liberation, and *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*), the ultimate liberation, the pinnacle of the spiritual journey, as the whole eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Wholesome and Unwholesome States

Wholesome (*kusala*) and unwholesome (*akusala*) are sometimes translated as “good” and “evil,” although these interpretations can be deceptive. While unwholesome states are not always seen as “evil” in the standard English sense, wholesome states are not usually sufficiently described by the term “good.” For instance, although though they are categorised as unwholesome, despair, melancholy, laziness, and distraction are not typically seen as “evil” as the term is popularly understood in English. In a similar vein, some wholesome attributes, like mental and physical serenity, do not easily align with the standard English definition of good.⁴

Wholesome and unwholesome are mental disorders that start in consciousness, have an impact there first, and then show themselves as behaviours and physical manifestations. As a result, the foundation of the meanings of wholesome and unwholesome is the condition, contents, and operations of consciousness. Generally speaking, wholesome can be described as intelligent, skillful, contented, beneficial, good, or that which removes affliction.⁵ In contrast, unwholesome is interpreted in the reverse way, signifying unintelligent, unskillful, and other adverse traits.

The Commentaries state that wholesome has four main meanings:

Arogya: mental well-being or freedom from disease. It describes mental states with characteristics or elements that promote mental wholesomeness and give rise to a stable, tranquil, and trouble-free consciousness.

² Ibid., p. 21.

³ Nyanaponika Thera, *The Vision of Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (London: Rider, 1986), pp.114-115.

⁴ P. A. Payutto, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha's Teaching*, trans. Bruce Evans (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993), p. 18.

⁵ Maung Tin, trans. *The Expositor (Atthasālinī)*, Part I (London: Pali Text Society), p. 43.

Anavajja: purity or flawlessness. Rather than being tarnished or veiled, it refers to mental elements that keep consciousness pure, unclouded, and free of impurities.

Kossalasambhūta: founded on intellect or insight. It speaks of mental states based on knowledge and an accurate perception of reality. The Buddhist teaching that *kusala* states have smart attention or intelligent contemplation (*yoniso manasikāra*) as their precursor lends credence to this explanation.

Sukhavipāka: leading to contentment or satisfaction. Wholesome is a state that inherently leads to happiness and contentment. Happiness and inner serenity inevitably follow when wholesome moods emerge in the mind, independent of outside factors. Wholesome states naturally result in happiness, just as a healthy person (*arogya*), clean and unstained (*anavajja*), and living in a safe and comfortable surroundings (*kossalasambhūta*) naturally enjoys a sense of well-being.⁶

The definition of unwholesome should be understood as the opposite of wholesome: it refers to a consciousness that is harmful, unhealthy, ignorant, and productive of suffering. To put it succinctly, it refers to mental states that degrade the quality and efficiency of consciousness, as opposed to wholesome states that improve and promote both. Examining the descriptions of the traits of a sound, trouble-free, and wholesome consciousness as given in the Commentaries can help to further explain these ideas. Next, this paper examines whether wholesome states do, in fact, foster these attributes and, if so, how they do so. Similarly, it investigates how unwholesome states lead to such degradation and whether they deprive the mind of these qualities.

The Moral Life of Early Humans

Moral is derived from the Latin “mores”, which means habits. Moral teaches us how to become a better person. When moral is used as an adjective, it refers to what is good or ethical. You are an excellent member of society if you possess a strong moral character. You could say, “He is not a moral person,” if someone lies and cheats. The dominant norms of conduct that allow individuals to coexist peacefully in communities are known as morals.

Ritual sacrifice in the early Vedic era was quite straightforward in both form and motivation. Offerings of milk, grain, and ghee were made to the gods, who were the familiar forces of nature. The goal was to either eliminate one’s adversaries or acquire the things of common desire, like children and animals. Now and again, the sacrifice appears to have been an act of gratitude to the gods for their previous blessings. The concept of sacrament may also have existed to some degree, with the worshipper thinking that when he consumed the sacrificial food, he was in communion with the divine or under a sacred influence.⁷

Earlier gods upheld morality to the point that virtue was rewarded with happiness in heaven with them. However, the concept of *iṣṭāpūrta* appears in the *Rgveda*, where *pūrta* refers to the gifts given to the priests and *iṣṭa* to the sacrifice presented to the gods. It was that that a person’s virtue from these deeds would ensure him bliss in the afterlife. This merit is not totally ethical, but it might become such if sacrifice is not mentioned and if it is believed that the outcomes of both good and evil activities would affect the circumstances and conditions of the next existence. In such an instance, we have a basic concept of karma. Additionally, the *Brāhmaṇas* list *punar-mṛtyu*, or repeated dying, as one of their severe penalties in the scale of rewards and punishments correlating to the good and terrible deeds of the current life. This is stated to occur on a different planet; repeated births are not mentioned, despite the fact that they are evidently necessary if repeated deaths are to occur. The acknowledgement of a sequence of births and deaths occurring either in this world or in a realm of better or worse conditions according to one’s record here elucidated the entire concept in the early *Upaniṣads*. Then, regardless of the gods, the main focus was on the natural results of good and evil activities, which could mature in the current life or in a future one.⁸

⁶ P. A. Payutto, *Good, Evil and Beyond: Kamma in the Buddha’s Teaching*, trans. Bruce Evans (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1993), p. 19.

⁷ M. Hiriyanna, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1993), p. 35.

⁸ H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), pp. 22-23.

In *Sanskrit*, the word *deva*, derived from *div*, which means “to shine,” denotes “god”; it is cognate with the Latin *deus*. It alludes to a time before the Aryans settled in India, when the idea of deity was connected to the bright forces of nature. *Yaj*, which means worship and is a root in several European languages, also reflects the early Aryans’ reverence for these spirits. As in the title *Yajurveda*, we see a connection with the Vedic *yaj*, which means to sacrifice. However, the meaning of *deva* changed when the concept of *karma* evolved and the gods’ power over humans consequently diminished. In Buddhism, depicting a *deva* as “god” is only permissible if the being in question is superior to the typical human person. The *devas* exist in distinct grades according to their level of mental development, whereas the gods of mythology mostly resemble works of poetic fancy, with their rank largely defined by the significance of the natural processes with which they are linked.⁹

The Beginning of Buddhist Moral Life

As is generally known, the right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) is the starting point of the Buddhist moral life. The elevation of the right view to this basic level serves to highlight how crucial our understanding of reality is to leading a moral life. Our beliefs about the nature of reality have a significant impact on how we behave in both our personal and social lives as well as how we react to our social surroundings. According to the Buddha, no single factor is as powerful in advancing the well-being of living things as the right view, and no single factor is as responsible for the suffering of living things as the wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*).¹⁰ This is the justification for Buddhism’s emphasis on the significance and applicability of the right view in leading a moral life. If a moral system is to be headed in the right direction, it must be founded on an accurate perception of reality and an accurate comprehension of our experience-based universe.

The Buddha emphasizes the value of having the correct perspective, yet he does not support dogmatic devotion to opinions, even if they are correct. The idea that “this alone is right; every other thing is false” stems from “to be fascinated with the rightness of our own opinions and ideologies” and “dogmatic attachment to theoretical views”. Bigotry and dogmatism are fostered by this kind of distorted mindset. Acts of fanaticism and militant piety, brainwashing and unethical conversion, fundamentalism and persecution, as well as interpersonal problems and acts of terrorism that frequently result in internecine warfare, are all known external expressions of such a mindset. From a Buddhist perspective, our excessive connection to worldly possessions is not nearly as dangerous or harmful as dogmatic commitment to beliefs. One example is the mistaken term holy wars, which relates to conflicts between and among religions. From a Buddhist viewpoint, a view is merely an action guide, which is why Buddhism does not promote dogmatic commitment to viewpoints. The Buddha teaches us in his famous talk on the Parable of the Raft (*kullūpama*) that his teachings should be viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in and of themselves.¹¹

Therefore, as the Buddha himself states, the usefulness of his teachings is limited to the achievement of the objective. It is not a symbol to be ceremoniously revered, but rather a means of transportation. This makes it abundantly evident that the right view, like all other viewpoints, is a conceptual model that directs behaviour. The reason it is referred to as the right view is since it guides us in the correct direction. Buddhism holds that having a right vision (*sammā-dassana*) of the true nature of the world, both inside and outside of ourselves, is the proper goal, namely knowledge and understanding of things as they truly are (*yathābhūta-ñāṇa*). For a person who possesses right understanding (*sammādiṭṭhi*), wholesome deeds that have not yet arisen come into being, while those that have already arisen grow stronger and become more developed. On the other hand, for one who holds incorrect comprehension (*micchādiṭṭhi*), unwholesome deeds that have not yet arisen are brought into being, while those that have already arisen are strengthened, increased, and further intensified.¹² Additionally,

⁹ H. Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 23.

¹⁰ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012), p.118.

¹¹ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2015), pp.79-80.

¹² Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012), pp.116-117.

right understanding serves as a foundation for wholesome intentions, right actions, right speech, and so forth. On the contrary, wrong understanding contributes to the development of unwholesome intentions, actions, speech, and so forth.

The Practice of the Noble Eightfold Path

The Buddha presents the Noble Eightfold Path as the fourth Noble Truth and as the fundamental outline for cultivating the Buddhist moral life. It comprises eight interconnected factors: right view (*sammā ditṭhi*), right intention (*sammā saṅkappa*), right speech (*sammā vācā*), right action (*sammā kammanta*), right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), right effort (*sammā vāyāma*), right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), and right concentration (*sammā samādhi*). It is known as the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of self-mortification and sensual indulgence.¹³ The Middle Way is not a compromise between two extremes; rather, it goes beyond both by avoiding the mistakes inherent in each. It rejects excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures by recognizing that desire cannot provide lasting happiness and by emphasizing renunciation. Since attachment to sensual pleasures is a cause of suffering, it must be abandoned to attain liberation. However, renunciation does not mean harming or abusing the body. Instead, it involves training consciousness, for which a healthy and well-maintained body is an important support. Therefore, one should care for the body properly while cultivating consciousness and developing the wisdom necessary for liberation. In this way, the Noble Eightfold Path represents the Middle Way, leading to vision, knowledge, peace, direct realization, enlightenment, and ultimately *Nibbāna* (*Nirvana*).¹⁴

A common misunderstanding is that the Noble Eightfold Path is intended exclusively for those who have abandoned household life and entered monastic life. Further, the Buddha's teaching makes clear that the path applies to both monastics and lay followers. He distinguishes between the wrong path (*micchā paṭipadā*) and the right path (*sammā paṭipadā*), identifying the former as contrary to the Noble Eightfold Path. The Buddha states that he does not recommend the wrong path either to laypeople or to monks. Therefore, the Noble Eightfold Path is not restricted to monks (*bhikkhu*) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*); it is also intended for laymen (*upāsaka*) and laywomen (*upāsikā*).

The applicability of the Noble Eightfold Path to lay followers can also be understood from the Buddha's explanation of right livelihood (*sammā ājīva*), the fifth factor of the path. Right livelihood requires one to avoid occupations that involve the trading of weapons, human beings, living beings, poisons, and intoxicating substances. Although these occupations are not necessarily limited to laypeople, they are primarily associated with individuals who earn their living through such activities. Therefore, the Buddha's definition of right livelihood clearly takes the circumstances and moral responsibilities of lay followers into account. The universal relevance of the Noble Eightfold Path is further demonstrated by its association with three beneficial results: happiness and well-being in the present life (*ditṭhadhamma-sukha*), welfare in the future life (*samparāya-hita*), and the path leading to the realization of *Nibbāna* (*nibbāna-gāminī paṭipadā*). Thus, the path is not restricted to a particular group but can be practiced according to an individual's circumstances and capacity. The Noble Eightfold Path may therefore be practiced at different levels and with varying degrees of commitment. Even when a person is unable to follow the path completely, it is still beneficial to practice it as fully as possible. Although the complete realization of the ideal represents the highest goal, making progress toward that ideal is itself valuable. A difference between moral principles and their actual practice is often found not only in religion but also in other areas of individual and social life. However, the difficulty of perfectly applying an ideal does not justify abandoning it. Rather, the ideal provides continual inspiration to cultivate what is right and to refrain from what is wrong.¹⁵

¹³ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2015), p.95.

¹⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path: The Way to the End of Suffering*, 2nd rev. ed. (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994), pp.22–23.

¹⁵ Y. Karunadasa, *Early Buddhist Teachings: The Middle Position in Theory and Practice* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2015), pp.95.96.

Morality (*Sīla*) in the Noble Eightfold Path

If the Noble Eightfold Path is further analyzed, it can be understood as being grounded in three fundamental principles: morality (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Right speech, right action, and right livelihood constitute the practice of morality (*sīla*). Right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration constitute the practice of concentration (*samādhi*). Right view and right intention constitute the practice of wisdom (*paññā*). Wisdom, in its highest form, culminates in enlightenment (*sammā-sambodhi*). At its initial stage, however, it consists of a sincere search for truth and an unbiased understanding of the laws of life insofar as they can be known through ordinary human experience. In this sense, wisdom is expressed as right view or right understanding (*sammā-diṭṭhi*). From the Buddhist perspective, right understanding is regarded as the first step on the path to liberation, because without it, neither morality nor concentration can fulfill their proper purpose.

Morality is the practical expression of right understanding. If a person follows moral principles merely out of fear of punishment or in expectation of reward, such morality lacks genuine spiritual value. From the Buddhist perspective, morality is not simply the cause of spiritual development but an expression of one's inner understanding and attitude. The harmony between one's inner understanding and one's actions, that is, inner truthfulness, is the true meaning of morality (*sīla*). For this reason, concentration (*samādhi*) cannot be properly developed without morality (*sīla*), because concentration requires inner harmony. Concentration (*samādhi*) represents harmony brought to its highest degree of perfection. In brief, wisdom (*paññā*) is harmony between the mind and the laws of reality; morality (*sīla*) is harmony between one's convictions and actions; and concentration (*samādhi*) is harmony among feeling, knowledge, and will, the integration of one's creative faculties in the experience of a higher reality.¹⁶

Sīla, which is often translated as "virtue" or "moral conduct," plays a crucial role in the growth of the spiritual life in the *Visuddhimagga*. The concept of *sīlana*, which means "composing," "coordinating," or "upholding," is used in the commentarial tradition to explain the word *sīla*. Therefore, *sīla* is more than just a collection of moral judgments or precepts. Instead, it is a theory that harmonises physical and verbal behaviour and offers a solid basis for the growth of wholesome mental states.

The first definition of *sīlana* is *samādhāna*, which means harmony and cooperation. When someone is virtuous, their speech, body language, and other behaviours become regular and well-organised. A person's thoughts, words, and deeds are all consistent when they are truly virtuous. Thus, moral discipline unifies and stabilises behaviour. A person who abstains from murder, theft, sexual misbehaviour, deceptive speech, and other negative behaviours eventually builds a life that is peaceful and devoid of the strife brought on by immoral behaviour. This is how virtue "composes" or balances the person. *Upadhāraṇa*, or supporting, is the second meaning of *sīlana*. In this way, wholesome moods are based on virtue (*ādhāra*). In a life where immoral behaviour predominates, wholesome mental characteristics are difficult to build. Purification of physical and verbal action provides the mind with an appropriate basis for additional spiritual growth. As a result, *sīla* encourages the development and upkeep of other virtues including compassion, wisdom, awareness, focus, and loving-kindness. Therefore, virtue is not a stand-alone practice but rather a prerequisite for advancing in the Buddhist path.

Another definition of the term "*sīla*" is also preserved by the commentators. Some use phrases like the meaning of head (*sira*) and the meaning of coolness (*sītala*) to convey its meaning. While "coolness" denotes independence from the heat and agitation associated with immoral and unwholesome states, the reference to "head" might be taken as signifying anything that functions as a principal or important base. According to this perspective, virtue is linked to a state of serenity and purity as well as something basic.¹⁷

¹⁶ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy and Its Systematic Representation According to the Abhidhamma Tradition* (London: Rider, 1969), p.70.

¹⁷ Bhaddantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), p.11.

Buddhaghosa states that four analytical categories can be used to understand virtue (*sīla*): characteristic (*lakkaṇa*), function (*rasa*), manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), and proximate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*). One of virtue's characteristics is that it creates and coordinates both physical and verbal actions while laying the groundwork for wholesome states. Its function (*rasa*) can be interpreted in two ways: from the perspective of achievement (*sampatti*), virtue results in blamelessness (*anavajja*), while from the perspective of action (*kicca*), virtue functions to restrain misconduct (*dussīla*). Pure bodily, verbal, and mental conduct is its manifestation (*paccupaṭṭhāna*), which makes virtue visible and understandable as a wholesome and pure state. The pair of conscience (*hiri*) and moral anxiety or moral dread (*ottappa*) is its proximate cause (*padaṭṭhāna*), as virtue emerges and endures when these two attributes are present but does not emerge or endure when they are absent. Buddhaghosa's analysis thus shows that *sīla* is an active ethical principle that governs behaviour, prevents misconduct, results in blamelessness, manifests as purity, and creates a foundation upon which additional wholesome qualities can arise and develop.¹⁸

The Classifications of Moral Virtue (*Sīla*)

The Path of Discrimination (*Paṭisambhidāmagga*) offers a thorough examination of virtue by differentiating between its ethical classifications and modalities of manifestation. According to this, there are four types of virtue: virtue as volition (*cetanā-sīla*), virtue as consciousness-concomitant (*cetasika-sīla*), virtue as restraint (*saṁvara-sīla*), and virtue as non-transgression (*avītikkaṃma-sīla*).¹⁹ This four-fold categorisation suggests that many analytical viewpoints can be used to comprehend virtue. First, since the purpose of abstaining from immoral action is a crucial component of virtuous behaviour, virtue can be viewed as *cetanā*, or volition. Second, virtue can be thought of as a consciousness-concomitant, which refers to the mental elements connected to morally relevant or wholesome consciousness. Third, virtue is defined as *saṁvara*, or restraint, in which one protects oneself from physical and verbal transgressions. Fourth, virtue is defined as non-transgression (*avītikkaṃma*), which means that one does not transgress accepted moral standards or training regulations. Therefore, virtue encompasses the volitional, mental, restraining, and non-transgressive aspects of ethical behaviour in addition to the outward manifestation of moral behaviour.

Additionally, the book divides virtue into three categories: wholesome (*kusala*), unwholesome (*akusala*), and indeterminate (*abyākata*). Wholesome consciousness gives rise to wholesome virtue, unwholesome consciousness to unwholesome virtue, and indeterminate consciousness to indeterminate virtue. Since the ethical nature of behaviour is largely dictated by the mental state from which it originates, this classification illustrates the tight relationship between virtue and consciousness. Therefore, virtue is linked to both constraint and non-transgression as well as the volition that results from the concept or intention of restraint and non-transgression. In this way, the research highlights the significance of the thought processes that underlie moral behaviour and goes beyond a solely behavioural explanation of morality.

The *Paṭisambhidāmagga* goes on to describe virtue by linking it to non-transgression (*avītikkaṃma*), restraint (*saṁvara*), and the volition (*cetanā*) that results from the desire to abstain from transgression. About killing living beings, stealing what is not given, and other such unwholesome conduct, virtue entails abstaining from these actions and observing the associated moral precepts. The five hindrances and other unwholesome mental tendencies can be overcome using the same technique. Renunciation (*nekkhamma*) controls sensual desire, non-ill-will (*abyāpāda*) controls ill-will, and awareness of light (*āloka-saññā*) controls stiffness and torpor. Non-distraction (*avikkhepa*), uncertainty (*dhmma-vavattāna*), and ignorance (*ñāṇa*) are the ways to overcome agitation. Finally, gladdening (*pahāḍsana*) is used to combat dullness or dissatisfaction.²⁰

Therefore, virtue (*sīla*) in the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* encompasses more than just following the five or ten precepts. To be virtuous, one must actively suppress undesirable inclinations and stop them from manifesting in one's body, speech, or thoughts. As a result, ethical discipline serves as a tool for developing positive mental traits in

¹⁸ Bhadantācariya Buddhaghosa, *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)*, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1991), p.12.

¹⁹ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Path of Discrimination (Paṭisambhidāmagga)*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), p.54.

²⁰ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Path of Discrimination (Paṭisambhidāmagga)*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Pali Text Society, 1997), p.55.

addition to serving as a deterrent against wrongdoing. The difference between non-transgression (*avītikkama*) and restraint (*saṅvara*) is very important: non-transgression (*avītikkama*) stresses the real non-violation of moral standards, whereas restraint (*saṅvara*) stresses the active restriction of unwholesome activity. When taken as a whole, these characteristics demonstrate how virtue functions both positively by encouraging the growth of a disciplined and wholesome consciousness and negatively by prohibiting unwholesome conduct. In this way, the *Paṭisambhidāmagga* links ethical restraint with the progressive renunciation of the defilements and the growth of the road toward liberation, presenting virtue as an essential basis of Buddhist mental cultivation.

Morality of Wholesome and Unwholesome

In general, an unwholesome action is any action motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion that results in immediate suffering or harm to oneself and others, adds to future karmic suffering, fosters the growth of unwholesome mental states, and undermines liberating wisdom. Wholesome deeds have the opposite qualities. They are motivated by virtue, prevent direct injury to oneself or others, aid in the moral and psychological growth of the individual performing them, and facilitate advancement along the Path toward *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*). However, it is important to distinguish between being karmically fruitful and being wholesome. The ability of an action to result in a specific karmic outcome, particularly happiness, is highlighted when it is described as karmically fruitful. In contrast, the phrase wholesome emphasizes the inherent nature of the behaviour or mental state. While karmically fruitful actions are considered wholesome, not all mental states that are deemed wholesome can be precisely recognised based on their karmic output.²¹ Based on these criteria, ten forms of unwholesome conduct may be identified: (1) killing living beings (*pāṇātipāṭa*), (2) taking what is not given (*adinnādāna*), (3) sexual misconduct (*kāmesu micchācāra*), (4) false speech (*musāvāda*), (5) malicious speech (*pisuṇāvācā*), (6) harsh speech (*pharusāvācā*), (7) gossip (*samphappalāpa*), (8) covetousness (*abhijjhā*), (9) ill-will (*byāpāda*), and (10) wrong view (*micchādiṭṭhi*).²²

These can be divided into three categories: misconduct of body, which includes the first three; misconduct of speech, which includes the following four; and misconduct of consciousness, which includes the last three. Avoiding these kinds of wrongdoing is what constitutes wholesome conduct. These manners are characterised as having unwholesome intents (*akusala-saṅcetanika*), causing suffering (*dukkha*), and ripening in suffering (*dukkha*). Thus, the notions of wholesome and unwholesome transcend the more limited Western classifications of morality and immorality. When morality or ethics are used in everyday English, they usually refer to behaviour toward other people, especially physical acts and verbal. The *Pali* concept of *sīla*, or moral virtue, is similar. However, the distinction between wholesome and unwholesome in Buddhist thought also includes mental states that might not directly or immediately affect other people. Hence, the ethical framework of Buddhism encompasses both the development and transformation of consciousness as well as external deeds.²³

Nibbāna (*Nirvāna*) is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, which is the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion. Because the path leading to this objective is not only contingently beneficial to it but also fundamentally tied to it, it is regarded as wholesome. The Path has a natural affinity with *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*), which stands for the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion, because it is composed of deeds and mental qualities founded in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion. This does not imply that *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*) is chosen at random as the ultimate aim and that deeds are then deemed virtuous just because they result in it.

²¹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.48.

²² Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), pp.132-133.

²³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.48.

Instead, regardless of whether a person is a Buddhist or not, deeds based on non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion can be acknowledged as wholesome in themselves.²⁴

Therefore, the goodness of such acts is based on the attributes from which they originate rather than just their outcomes. This perspective implies that *Aristotelian* ethics may have a strong Western equivalent to Buddhist ethics. According to Aristotle, the development of virtues- stable moral inclinations that lead a person toward human flourishing, is at the core of ethics.²⁵ Hence, it is possible to understand both *Aristotelian* and Buddhist ethics as systems that focus on human perfection through the development of knowledge, character, and the combined growth of the intellectual and emotive aspects of human life. According to Buddhism, this entails conquering spiritual ignorance and yearning, which feed off one another, by developing moral, intellectual, and emotional virtues that somewhat mirror the characteristics of the liberating objective they lead to. According to both faiths, a deed is justified if it exemplifies a virtue and advances human perfection. Insofar as they guide human behaviour toward a telos, or ultimate aim, with which the virtues and acts have an inherent relationship, both are thus referred to as teleological ethical theories. This is in contrast to a purely consequentialist perspective, like utilitarianism, where an action is assessed mostly based on the results it generates. Thus, Buddhist ethics, like *Aristotelian* ethics, emphasises not just the result of an action but also its motivation, character, and attributes.

CONCLUSION

Sīla, or moral virtue, is a crucial component of the Buddhist path that leads to the ultimate goal of liberation rather than an end in and of itself. This is exemplified in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where the purification of virtue (*sīla-visuddhi*) leads to the purification of consciousness (*citta-visuddhi*), which in turn leads to the purification of view (*diṭṭhi-visuddhi*). This development culminates in the unshakeable liberation of consciousness and the realisation of *Nibbāna* (*Nirvāna*) without attachment through increasingly deeper stages of spiritual insight. The holy life (*brahmacariya*) is pursued eventually for freedom rather than only to reach any intermediate step, even though each stage of the road lays the groundwork for the subsequent one.²⁶ This is because practitioners may become complacent, arrogant, or proud of their accomplishments, which would impede further advancement, and attachment may still be present at lesser levels of spiritual development. However, in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha explains to *Ānanda* how wholesome virtue (*kusala sīla*) leads to freedom from remorse (*avippaṭisāra*), freedom from remorse to gladness (*pāmojja*), joy to tranquillity (*passaddhi*), tranquillity to happiness (*sukha*), happiness to concentration (*samādhi*), concentration to knowledge and vision of things as they truly are (*yathābhūta-ñānadassana*), knowledge and vision to disenchantment (*nibbidā*) and dispassion (*virāga*), and finally to liberation.²⁷ Thus, moral virtue (*sīla*) should not be viewed as only a collection of moral precepts but rather as an essential part of the Buddhist path, offering the foundation for the growth of mental peace, focus, wisdom, and, eventually, liberation.

The various elements of the Path support and interact with one another to produce a harmonious whole since the cultivation of one stage in this developmental process inevitably leads to the cultivation of the next. But just as the earth gives plants a foundation and a foundation supports a house, moral excellence is the basis of all these elements. The Path's development can be interpreted as follows when it is divided into the conventional three categories of virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*) in that order. A practitioner first sets

²⁴ *Ibid.* p.50.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.32-33.

²⁶ Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, ed. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.244.

²⁷ Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2012), p.1340.

out to cultivate virtue, which is demonstrated by a self-disciplined and giving manner of living for the benefit of oneself and others, after being influenced and inspired by good examples.²⁸

This commitment is motivated by a preliminary degree of wisdom, which is represented through faith (*saddhā*), or trustful confidence, and consists of some knowledge of the Buddhist perspective on reality along with the desire to put it into practice. The practitioner goes on to practice meditation since virtue is an essential basis for additional spiritual growth. Deeper knowledge can emerge and experiential awareness of the *Dhamma* can grow as a result of consciousness gradually becoming calmer, more stable, and clearer through suitable and consistent practice. In turn, virtue is strengthened by this growing wisdom, which strengthens the foundation for additional meditation and wisdom development. As a result, the *Dīgha Nikāya* asserts that morality and wisdom complement one another like two hands washing one another.²⁹

Greed, anger, and delusion are examples of defilements that show up on three different levels: as unwholesome physical and verbal actions, as unwholesome mental states or ideas, and as latent mental tendencies that serve as the foundation for these manifestations. The external manifestation of such defilements through physical and verbal behaviour is restrained by moral virtue (*sīla*). While liberating insight (*paññā*) eliminates the deeper defilements that remain as latent tendencies, meditation (*bhāvanā*) lessens and eventually removes defilements that are actively present in the mind. Therefore, the Buddhist path can be viewed as a progressive process of mental development, liberating insight, and ethical restraint that eventually results in the total eradication of the impurities at their source.

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²⁸ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.41.

²⁹ Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), p.131.

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