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**BUDDHIST ETHICS OF *PANCHA SHILA*:
A SOLUTION TO THE PRESENT DAY
AND FUTURE PROBLEMS**

Abstract

Most of the religions of the world are based on some fundamental moral principles of good conduct/virtues and prohibits its followers to do anything which is not good for the welfare of the society as a whole. This fundamental moral principal of good conduct, in Buddhism, is known as *Pancha Shila* (Five Precepts or Five Virtues). *Pancha Shila* is the basic assumption of moral activities for both households as well as for renunciates. It forms the actual practice of morality. Each time the precepts are upheld, the moral volitions are strengthened, until morality becomes a habitual trait through the condition of repetition. For the smooth functioning of a society, every Buddhist has to follow the five moral precepts i.e. abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from falsehood, abstaining from taking intoxicants.

Jainism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam too accept such ethical codes with little modification. These are called cardinal virtues. Jaina concept of *Pancha Mahavrata* is very close to Buddhist concept of *Pancha Shila*. In Jainism these are; *Ahimsa* (Abstinence from all injury to life), *Satyam* (Abstinence from falsehood), *Asteyam* (Abstinence from stealing), *Brahmacharyam* (abstinence from self indulgence), *Aparigraha* (Abstinence from all attachment). Mahatma Gandhi too accepted these five cardinal virtues given by Jainism but he added two more in it which are; Fearlessness and Faith in God.

The five precepts of Buddhism offers the moral conducts following which everyone can avoid evil deeds and can contribute in making this world a better world for present and future generations. The precept of abstaining from killing leads to the respect for other's life. The precept of abstaining from stealing leads to the respect for other's property. The precept of abstaining from sexual misconduct leads to the respect for one's own dignity and dignity of other's especially women. The precept of abstaining from falsehood leads to the respect for honesty. The precept of

abstaining from taking alcohol leads to innumerable number of good qualities like respect for a clear mind, respect for modesty of other human beings, respect for money, respect for one's own dignity, respect for other's life and so on.

The five precepts of Buddhism make a person disciplined, which is one of the most important ingredients for the development of overall personality of a person. A developing country cannot become a developed one unless its citizens are disciplined.

If we analyze the five precepts given by Buddhism then, we find that the solution for most of world problems lies in it. If everyone follows five precepts then, I think this world will be transformed into a better place, a place where people have respects for other's life and property, where everybody's interest will be taken care of, where people will have an altruistic approach towards society. In short, this world can be transformed into a heaven.

Key words: Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Buddhism, Precept, Nibbana, Pancha Mahavrata, Panch shila, Manusmriti, Quran, Ahimsa, Hadith, Bhagvadgita, Jainism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam.

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Most of the religions of the world are based on some fundamental moral principles of good conduct/virtues and prohibits its followers to do anything which is not good for the welfare of the society as a whole. This fundamental moral principal of good conduct, in Buddhism, is known as *Pancha Shila* (Five Precepts or Five Virtues). *Pancha Shila* is the basic assumption of moral activities for both laymen as well as for renunciates. It is the basic ethical code which is indispensable for acquiring highest moral, spiritual and ethical standard i.e. *Nibbana* in Buddhism. It is not a concept to practice rituals but a way of life. It forms the actual practice of morality. Each time the precepts are upheld, the moral volitions are strengthened, until morality becomes a habitual trait through the condition of repetition. For the smooth functioning of a society, every Buddhist has to follow the five moral precepts i.e. **abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining from falsehood, abstaining from taking intoxicants.**

Jainism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam too accept such ethical code with little modification. These are called cardinal virtues. Jaina concept of *Pancha Mahavrata* is very close to Buddhist concept of *Pancha Shila*. In Jainism these are; *Ahimsa* (Abstinence from all injury to life), *Satyam* (Abstinence from falsehood), *Asteyam* (Abstinence from stealing), *Brahmacharyam* (abstinence from self-indulgence), *Aparigraha* (Abstinence from all attachment). Mahatma Gandhi too accepted these five cardinal virtues given by Jainism but he added

two more in it which are; Fearlessness and Faith in God. So, in Gandhian Philosophy there are seven cardinal virtues i.e. Non-Killing, Truth, Non-Stealing, Non-Possession, Non-Self indulgence, Fearlessness and Faith in God.

The First Precept: Abstaining from Killing

By first precept Buddhism prohibits a person from destroying, causing to be destroyed, or sanctioning to be destroyed, or sanctioning the destruction of a living being. Living being implies anything that has life, from insect up to man. This precept is applicable to all creatures irrespective of their size. It is known as *Panatipata Virati* in Pali.

There are five conditions which constitute the immoral act of killing:¹

1. The fact and presence of a living being, human or animal.
2. The knowledge that the being is a living being.
3. The intent or resolution to kill.
4. The act of killing by appropriate means.
5. The resulting death.

There are six means of killing:²

1. Killing with one's own hands.
2. Causing another to kill by giving an order.
3. Killing by shooting, pelting with stones etc.
4. Killing by digging trenches, etc. and entrapping a being.
5. Killing by the power of occult means.
6. Killing by mantras, or occult sciences.

Killing is an immoral act. Its degree of depravity varies with reference to the being as victim. It is similar to the Jaina, Hindu and Gandhian concept of Ahimsa i.e. non-injury, which is considered the most important precept. By accepting the first precept we can rule out the intentional killing of any living being, human or otherwise. This means laying aside violence in respect of every being both living and non-living. One should neither kill a living creature, nor cause to kill nor approve of others killing. Non-violence demands not only abstention from injury but also the practice of loving-kindness to all. In Buddhism it is said;

¹ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics*, Wisdom Publication, London, 1987, Page: 75.

² *Ibid*, page: 75.

“He who destroys the life of any being may, in his next birth, meet death unexpectedly while in the prime of life, even though he is possessed of all the amenities of life, wealth and beauty like an Adonis.”³

The scope of this virtue covers not only humans but all sentient being. However, it is worse to injure a human than an animal or a highly developed animal than less developed ones. By accepting this precept, Buddhism opposes the major problems of present day world i.e. Euthanasia, abortion, female feticide, infanticide and capital punishment etc.

Jainism, by discussing this virtue says that one should not think and speak of taking life, nor even permit nor encourage others to take life. Otherwise the vow of Ahimsa cannot be fully maintained. Mahatma Gandhi, by accepting the vow of *Ahimsa* says that one should be non-violent in his action, speech and thought. *Ahimsa* literally means Non-violence i.e. non-injury or non-killing. Gandhi says,

“Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed.”

According to Gandhi, the ultimate aim of human life is the realization of truth, the supreme reality which can be achieved by following the path of *Ahimsa*. It is not only a negative state of harmlessness but a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer. According to Gandhi, *Ahimsa* is the highest virtue; *Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*.

The Second Precept: Abstaining from Stealing

In Pali it is known as *Adinnadana Virati*. The word *adinna* means ‘what is not given’ and *adana* means ‘taking’. Therefore, the term *adinnadana* means ‘taking what is not given’. This precept advises a Buddhist to abstain from taking things that do not belong to him. Monks who live on charity should accept their requisites only when they are offered. This precept is an injunction against any form of dishonest dealing. Five factors constitute the immoral act of stealing, namely:⁴

³ *Ibid.*, page: 76.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page-87.

1. Other's property.
2. Awareness of the fact that it is other's property that is being taken.
3. The immoral volition of stealing.
4. The employment of a device to steal.
5. The act of removing the property.

Two modes of thieving are mentioned in Buddhism; direct and indirect. The direct mode consists in taking anything belonging to another person without first securing his or her consent. The indirect mode involves fraud and deceptions whereby a man may cheat another out of something that rightly belongs to him.

According to the Buddhist text, six ways of stealing are possible:⁵

1. Stealing by one's own hands.
2. Stealing by false measure and weights.
3. Stealing by force.
4. Stealing by concealment.
5. Stealing by design.
6. Stealing by forgery.

This precept negates the possibility of every act of theft. It means taking what is not given to you socially, legally and morally. The thief suffers in an unhappy state for a long time. It also includes and prohibits all types of fraud, cheating, forgery and falsely denying that one is in debt to someone. Even in some countries gambling is also included under this precept. Nagarjuna in "*Raja-Parikatha-Ratnamala*" mentioned;

"That gambling causes avarice, unpleasantness, hatred, deception, cheating, wildness, lying, senseless and harsh speech. Therefore, never gamble."⁶

The sanctity of the property of others like that of their lives is recognized by this precept. This precept known as *Asteya*, is also accepted by Jainism and Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi explained this precept in two senses;

1. Not to take away the belongings or the property of anybody unless it is given by that person.

⁵ Prof. Mahesh Tiwari, *Perspective on Buddhist Ethics*, Department of Buddhist Ethics, 1989, Page: 83.

⁶ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, page: 70.

2. It forbids the keeping or holding in possession of such things that are not needed.

But in today's society the incidents of theft and stealing are increasing day by day. According to a crime chart uploaded by Delhi Police on its website shows that in 2015 alone there had been more than sixty thousands cases of theft, snatching etc. are reported. It is clear from this report that if this precept is followed, the incidents of such cases can be reduced.

The Third Precept: Abstaining from Sexual Misconduct

This precept of good conduct advises Buddhists to abstain from unlawful sexual intercourse. In Pali this precept is known as *Kamesu Micchacaramani*. *Kama* means lustful attachment to male or female, and *micchacara* means wrong conduct. The immoral act of unchastity is the violation or sense desire of a male for a female or a female for a male.

The Buddha said;

“A wise man should avoid unchastity as if it were a pit of burning cinders. One who is not able to live in a state of celibacy should, at least, not break the purity of another man's wife.”⁷

Sexual desire is the one of the most intense desire in the most living beings but in man this desire is more intense than other living creatures because in the animals this desire is periodic and seasonal while in man it is continual.

In Buddhism, one breaks this precept by;⁸

1. Having sexual relation with a forbidden wife.
2. Having sexual relation with one's wife through a forbidden part.
3. Having sexual relation in an unsuitable place like uncovered plane, a shrine or forest.
4. Having sexual relation in an unsuitable time when the wife is pregnant.

This precept known as *Brahmacharya* i.e. abstinence from self-indulgence is also accepted by Jainism. This vow is generally interpreted as celibacy but it is acknowledged that not everyone feels able or willing to follow this ideal. This

⁷ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, op.cit., page: 88.

⁸ Peter Harvey, op. cit., page: 73.

precept is primarily related to the avoidance of causing suffering by one's sexual behavior. The clearest breach of this precept is adultery i.e. going with the wife of others in any form. It not only prohibits adultery but also prohibits having intercourse with women who are engaged, with whom one is not morally and legally allowed. So, all kinds of rape, incest, sexual misconduct and sexual violence against women are strictly prohibited.

Celibacy is involved in the monastic ideal of Buddhism. But it is acknowledged that everyone is not willing to follow this ideal. It is also said that a life of non-celibacy should not be followed by the wise man, like a pit of burning coal. But if he is incapable of living a celibate life, he should not transgress against another's wife.

Homosexuality is also prohibited according to this precept. As of now, around 27 countries of the world has legalized same sex marriages but according to this precept same sex marriages are not allowed as it is against the law of nature and contrary to family values. Homosexuality is also prohibited in Christianity, Islam and Hinduism too. In Bible it is prohibited in the book of *Leviticus* which talks about unlawful sexual relations, where it is said;

“Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is detestable.”⁹

Homosexuality is also prohibited in Islam. There are so many verses in *The Quran* and Authentic *Hadith* of Prophet Mohammad which clearly says that it comes under the category of a sin. As *Allah* says in *The Quran*;

“Would you really approach men in your lust rather than women? No, you are a people (grossly) ignorant!”¹⁰

Homosexuality is also prohibited in 26:165-166 and 29: 28-29 of *The Quran*.

It is also prohibited in the authentic *Hadith* of Prophet Mohammad. As the Prophet says in one *Hadith*;

⁹ *Holy Bible*, New International Version, Book of Leviticus, 18:22.

¹⁰ Abdullah Yusuf Ali: *The Holy Quran*, (27:55) text, translation and commentary, Kitab Bhavan, New Delhi, 2006.

“A man should not see the private parts of another man, and a woman should not see the private parts of another woman, and a man should not lie with another man under one covering, and a woman should not lie with another woman under one covering.”¹¹

Homosexuality is prohibited in Hinduism too. It is prohibited in chapter 11 and chapter 16 of *Manusmṛti* and *Bhagavadgita* respectively. It is prohibited in *Manusmṛti*;

“Homosexual behavior among ordinary, twice-born males is considered an offence atoned for by taking a ritual bath or paying relatively small fines.”¹²

By explaining this vow Jainism prohibits the self indulgence of every form i.e. external and internal, subtle and gross, mundane and extra-mundane.

According to Mahatma Gandhi, it means abstinence from sexual relation or at least physical control over sexual organs. It means putting a check and restraints over all the senses and mind.

The problem of rape can be minimized up to some extent if this precept is followed with full dedication. A United Nation report compiled from government sources of 65 countries showed that more than 2, 50,000 cases of rape or attempted rape were recorded by police annually. In India rape is the fourth most common crime against women. According to the National Crime Records Bureau 2013, around 24,923 rape cases were reported across India in 2012. Out of these 98% are committed by a known person.

Because of sexual misconduct the cases of HIV infection are increasing. As per the WHO report of 2013, since beginning of the epidemic around 78 million people have been infected with the HIV virus and about 39 million have died. Today globally 35 million are living with HIV infection.

The Fourth Precept: Abstaining from falsehood

In Pali, this precept is known as *Musavada Virati*. This precept covers the act of telling something which is not true, the concealing of the truth in such a

¹¹ *Hadith, Sahih Muslim*, Book: 3, Hadith: 667.

¹² *Manusmṛti*, 11:175.

manner as to convince another person that untruth is the truth, the use of exaggerated language. In short, it includes everything that is in any sense a departure from a reliable sober statement of fact. Speaking untruth involves four factors in itself;¹³

1. The untruth itself.
2. The intent to deceive.
3. The effort so involved.
4. The act of communicating the untruth.

This precept means not only speaking what is true but speaking what is true as well as good and pleasant. Lying is to be avoided not only because it harms others, but it goes against the Buddhist value of speaking the truth, seeing things “as they really are”. When someone deceives other, he deceives himself too. Truth can be harmful if spoken at the wrong time. That is why, it is said that Buddha only spoke at the appropriate time, what was true and spiritually beneficial whether it was disagreeable to others or not.

In assigning importance of the highest order to this precept I quote;

“Speak the truth. Do not be angry. When you are asked, give-if only a little. From these three conditions one may go into the vicinity of *devas*.”¹⁴

In Jainism this vow is taken very rigorously. For the perfect maintenance of this vow, one must conquer greed, fear and anger. In Gandhian Philosophy this precept of truth is given the highest place because of its importance and was given a place higher than God. That is why in spite of saying that ‘God is Truth’, Gandhi said, ‘Truth is God’. To practice this precept one must constantly endeavor to free oneself from the evil of anger, greed, infatuation, pride etc. Truth should be spoken in a pleasant way.

The Fifth Precept: Abstaining from Taking Intoxicants or Alcohol

In Pali this is known as *Suramerayamajjappamaddtthana Virati*. The fifth precept concerns the Buddhist abstention from taking distilled and fermented intoxicating liquor. He should not take intoxicating drinks. The householders

¹³ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, op.cit., page: 93.

¹⁴ *Dhammapada*: 207.

who likes this teaching does not urge others to drink and does not condone drinking, knowing that it ends in madness. Through drunkenness foolish people commit evils and cause them to be committed by other foolish people. Avoid that which is a realm of evils, maddening, deluding, and the delight of the foolish.¹⁵

Taking alcohol should be avoided because it diminishes the clarity of consciousness. The fifth virtue is one of the most important because if the fifth one is violated, other four virtues cannot be followed properly. It means 'right mindfulness'. Alcohol adversely affects one's ability to remember, to think, to make rational judgments, to take right decisions and to act as a conscientious moral agent and ultimately becomes a hurdle to the right path. Alcohol decreases all the good virtues; this worldly and other worldly. Nagarjuna in "*Raja-Parikatha-Ratnamala*" mentioned;

"Alcohol leads to worldly scorn, affairs are ruined, and wealth is wasted. The unsuitable is done from delusion. Therefore, never take intoxicants."¹⁶

He further lists thirty-five serious and immediate consequences of alcohol. Elsewhere alcohol is said to destroy one's self-respect and fear of bad faith.

Drunkenness is described as the 'delight of the fools' and in one *Sutta*, Buddha says that if one breaks the fifth precept, it leads to six dangers:¹⁷

1. Present waste of money.
2. Increased quarrelling.
3. Liability to sickness.
4. Loss of good name.
5. Indecent exposure to one's person.
6. Weakening of one's wisdom.

Alcohol is one of the biggest problems in developing as well as developed countries. Problems of rape, murder, theft and falsehood are closely associated with the problem of alcohol as it is proved by so many researches across the world. If everyone accepts and follows only fifth precepts most of the problems of the present and future will be solved.

¹⁵ Hammalawa Saddhatissa, op.cit., page: 95.

¹⁶ Peter Harvey, op. cit., Page: 77.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Page: 77.

The use of alcohol is strictly prohibited in almost all the major religions of the world. In Islamic philosophy the use of alcohol is strictly prohibited. In *The Quran* alcohol is mentioned as '*Khamr*' (intoxicants like alcohol and drugs). As *Allah* says in *The Quran*;

"By means of intoxicants and games of chance *satan* seeks only show enmity and hatred among you, and to turn you away from the remembrance of God and from prayer. Will you not, then, desist?"¹⁸

The same concept that one should abstain oneself from intoxicants is also mentioned in 5:90 and 2:291 of *The Quran*.

The use of alcohol is also prohibited at more than 15 places in the Bible. As it is said;

"He must abstain from wine and other fermented drink and must not drink vinegar made from wine or other fermented drink. He must not drink grape juice or eat grapes or raisins."¹⁹

The use of alcohol and alcohol made products are prohibited in the book of Leviticus 10:9, book of Deuteronomy 29:6, book of Judges 13:4,7,14, book of Proverb 20:1, 31:4, book of Isaiah 5:11, 22, 24:9, 28:7, 29:9, 56:12.

The use of alcohol is also prohibited in *Manusmṛti*, written by Manu, which is considered as the Hindu law book. It is mentioned in *Manusmṛti*;

"A killer of a *Brahmana*, a **wine drinker**, a thief, and a defiler of his preceptor's or superior's bed should be respectively known as great sinners."²⁰

It is also prohibited in 11:55, 11:94 of *Manusmṛti*.

Antonia Abbey, Wayne State University, Michigan said, 25% of American women experienced sexual assault including rape. Approximately 50% of those cases are because of alcohol consumption. A report by National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (NCADD), New York, says that alcohol is a factor in 40% of all violent crimes today including rape, murder etc. A report

¹⁸ *The Holy Quran*, op. cit., 5:91.

¹⁹ *Holy Bible*, New International Version, International Bible Society, 1984, Book of Numbers, 6:3.

²⁰ *Manusmṛti*, 9:235.

by Community against Drunken Driving (CADD) showed that 70 % of Delhi deadly road accident is caused by drunken driving.

According to the WHO report (2013);

1. Worldwide 3.3 million deaths occur because of harmful use of alcohol, which is 5.9 % of total death in the world.
2. Alcohol is the causal factor in more than 200 diseases and injuries.
3. In the age group 20-39 years approximately 25% of the total deaths are caused by alcohol.
4. There is a causal relationship between harmful use of alcohol and a range of mental and behavioral disorder.
5. Beyond health consequences, the use of alcohol brings significant social and economic losses to individual and society at large.

Those who are preparing for monastic life or who are not involved in family life, are expected to follow five more precepts:

1. One simple meal a day before noon.
2. Avoid purposeless or valueless entertainment.
3. Avoid using ornaments.
4. Use simple things including bed and seat.
5. Avoid use of money.

The five precepts offers the moral conducts following which everyone can avoid evil deeds and can contribute in making this world a better world for the present as well as for future generation. The first three precepts are related to the curtailment of physical misdeed. The fourth and fifth are related to the curtailment of vocal and mind, body and speech in general.

The precept of abstaining from killing leads to the respect for other's life, universal brotherhood or universal love, kindness and compassion. The precept of abstaining from stealing leads to the respect for other's property, generosity, renunciation and non-covetousness. The precept of abstaining from sexual misconduct leads to the respect for our pure nature, family feeling in society and joyous satisfaction with one's own wife. The precept of abstaining from falsehood leads to the respect for honesty, trust and dependency. The precept of abstaining from taking alcohol leads to innumerable number of good qualities like respect for a clear mind, respect for other's modesty, respect for money, respect for one's own dignity, respect for other's life and so on.

The *Pancha shila* of Buddhism make a person disciplined, which is one of the most important ingredient for the development of overall personality of a

person. A developing country cannot become developed one unless its citizens are disciplined. Discipline means not to do undesirable practices, to follow the set protocols, norms of a society, regulations and the law of the lands set to improve the performance of societies and individuals. Indiscipline in honest action leads to corruption which is a major stumbling block in the progress of a nation and can be corrected by following the five moral precepts given by Buddhism.

If we analyze the five precepts, we find that the solution for most of the world problems lies in it. If everyone follows *Pancha shila*, this world will be transformed into a better place, a place where people have respect for other's life and property, where everybody's interest will be taken into account, where people will have an altruistic approach towards society. In short this world can be transformed into a heaven.

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