Buddhist ethics has a central role in Buddhism, a role of moral reform movement in countering the morality approach of the brāhmana and śramana traditions. Both of these traditions hold doctrines that have dangerous ethical implications for Man.

The fundamental Buddhist ethical system is closely linked to the cultivation of morality in an attempt to change one’s patterns of behavior or lifestyle. This taming of the body and mind will lead to a voluntary and radical transformation of our habitual tendencies in bodily and verbal behavior, and mental attitudes.

**What is ethics?**

* Ethics has to do with human conducts and is concerned with questions regarding what is good and bad, what is right and wrong, what are justices, what are our duties, obligations and rights. Good or bad depends very much on his choice. What makes a person a human being is that facing choices and making use of them.
* In Dhammapada (183), Buddhist ethics is summed up as follows:

“Not to do evil (pāpassa), to cultivate the good (kusala) and to purify one’s mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha. ”

“Sabba pāpassa akaraņaḿ, kusalassa upasampadā, sacitta pariyodapanaḿ. Etam buddhānasāsanaḿ”

* With the above stanza in mind, Buddhist ethics enables one to differentiate between a good and a bad action, appreciate or condemn a particular customary conduct and choose the right kind of action.
* The ultimate goal in Buddhism is the attainment of emancipation or freedom from suffering or unsatisfactoriness. Morality consisting ethical practices forms a foundation or the basis for spiritual development and perfection towards ultimate or highest good. With the practice in meditation, it helps to form a moral habit together as a gradual process and leads to the development of wisdom (paññā).
* In Kimattha sutta (A 11.1), the Buddha repeatedly implores us to cultivate virtue: “*So you see, Ânanda, good conduct or skilful virtue has freedom from remorse as object and profit; freedom from remorse has joy; joy has rapture; rapture has calm; calm has happiness; happiness has concentration; concentration has seeing things as they really are; seeing things as they really are has revulsion and fading of interest; revulsion and fading of interest have release by knowing and seeing as their object and profit. So you see, Ânanda, good conduct gradually leads to the summit.”*

**What are the criteria that enable us to recognize and distinguish right acts from wrong?**

1. According to Buddhism, one way of deciding whether an action is right or wrong, good or bad is by finding out whether it leads to detachment (virago) or attachment (raga). Those things or actions that lead to non-attachment are considered good because it leads to happiness and freedom. Whereas those that lead to attachment are considered bad as they are subject to suffering and bondage.
2. The Ambalaţţhikārāhulovāda sutta (MN61) is generally described as the “Mirror of the Dhamma” – looking into it one should reflect before, during and after doing any deed by body, speech or thought.

It is defined that whatever action, bodily, verbal or mental, leads to suffering for oneself, for others, or for both, that action is bad. Whatever action, bodily, verbal or  *mental, does not lead to suffering for oneself, for others, or for both, that action is* good.

Generally, this enables one to determine for oneself whether an action is good or bad that leads to happy, pleasant consequences or unhappy, unpleasant consequences for oneself and others. Thus, one reflects on the pros and cons of an action before it is performed.

1. We may question how that right actions are right and wrong actions are wrong. The Buddha said that when we state a falsehood knowingly, then our conscience knows whether what we say is true or false, thus suggested that our conscience tells us what is right or wrong. Furthermore, we can base on the following criteria to decide whether the action is wrong:

1) My conscience (attādipateyya) reproaches me if I do it.

2) The wise would disapprove of it after examination or what the world or society says.

3) One would tend to be born in a state of downfall as a result of doing it.

1. In Anumāna sutta (MN15 i:97-98), it is said that one should make one’s likes and dislikes the criterion to decide whether to do something or refrain from doing something.

The sutta states *“such or such a person is evil minded and is under the influence of evil and as such, I do not like him and resent him. Likewise, if I do become evil minded and if I allow evil thoughts to rule me, I too would not be liked by others; and reflecting thus one should try to dispel evil thoughts that come to one’s mind. Similarly, he continues to reflect regarding self exaltation and disparagement of others, anger, conceit, jealousy etc in the same manner.”*

**Ethical cultivation towards spiritual lifestyle**

* The entire process of training that a seeker of the Buddhist goal is required to fulfill can be seen as an attempt to eliminate unwholesome deeds and to cultivate wholesome deeds. This practice contributes to the welfare and happiness of oneself (attahita) and others (parahita).
* Among the four types of persons in the world, Buddha praised one who is bent on the welfare of oneself as well as of others, is the chief and best, highest and supreme. The other three types are - he who bent neither on his own welfare nor on the welfare of others; he who bent on the welfare of others but not his own; he who bent on his own welfare but not of others.
* In Dhammapada (166), “One should not, on the whole, hinder one’s own welfare at the cost of serving others; perceiving one’s own welfare, one should devote oneself for the sake of the general good.”
* In Sallekha sutta (MN8), “It is not possible for a man who has not saved himself to save another; it is only a man who has saved himself can help save another.”

**How to lead a virtuous, successful, happy and perfected life?**

In the Sigalovada sutta, Sigāla was the son of a Buddhist family residing in Rajagaha. His parents were devout followers of the Buddha but he was indifferent to religion. As the father was about to die, he called his son to the deathbed and told him that after morning bath worship the six quarters. Sigāla assured his father that he will carry out his last wish, not, however, knowing its true significance.

The Buddha said the following should be looked upon as the six quarters:-

1) Parents as the East

2) Teachers as the South

3) Wife and children as the West

4) Friends and associates as the North

5) Servants and employees as the Nadir

6) Ascetics and Brahmins as the Zenith

**1a) A child should minister to his parents as the East in five ways:-**

1) Having supported me I shall support them

2) I shall do their duties

3) I shall keep the family tradition

4) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance

5) I shall offer alms in honour of my departed relatives

**1b) Parents should show their compassion in five ways:-**

1) Restrain them from evil

2) Establish them in doing good

3) Make them train in a craft

4) Arrange a suitable marriage-partner

5) Hand over their inheritance at the proper time

**2a) A pupil should minister to a teacher as the South in five ways:-**

1) Rise from the seat in salutation

2) Attend to him

3) Eager to learn

4) Personal service

5) Pay attention while receiving instruction about the craft/skill in trade occupation

**2b) Teachers should show their compassion in five ways:-**

1) Train them well in discipline

2) Ensure they grasp their lesson well

3) Instruct them in the craft/trade and lore/lesson/traditional knowledge or beliefs

4) Introduce them to their friends and associates

5) Provide for their safety

**3a) Husband should minister his wife as the West in five ways:-**

1) Courteous to her

2) Not despising her

3) Faithful to her

4) Give her the authority

5) Give her adornments

**3b) Wife should show her compassion in five ways:-**

1) Performs her duties well

2) Being kind to his relations and attendants

3) Faithful to him

4) Protects what has been saved and stored

5) Skillful and industrious in all her duties

**4a) Clansman minister to his friends and associates as the North in five ways:-**

1) Liberality/Generosity

2) Courteous speech

3) Helpful

4) Impartial

5) Sincerity

**4b) Friends and associates should show compassion to him in five ways:-**

1) Protect him when he is heedless

2) Protect his property when he is heedless

3) Become a refuge when he is in danger

4) Do not forsake him in his troubles

5) Honour his offspring

**5a) Master should minister his servants and employees as the Nadir in five ways:-**

1) Assign them work according to their ability

2) Supply them with food and wages

3) Attend to them in sickness

4) Share delicacies with them

5) Grant them leave at proper time

**5b) Servants and employees should show compassion to him in five ways:-**

1) Rise before him

2) Sleep after him

3) Take only what is given

4) Perform their work well

5) Uphold his good name and fame

**6a) Householder should minister to ascetic and Brahmins as the Zenith in five ways:-**

1) Lovable deeds

2) Lovable words

3) Lovable thoughts

4) Welcome them

5) Supply them with material needs

**6b) Ascetics and Brahmins should show compassion to him in six ways:-**

1) Restrain him from evil

2) Establish him in doing goods

3) Have compassion for him with a kind heart

4) Make him hear what he has not heard

5) Clarify what he has already heard

6) Point out the path to heaven

**Reference:**

**1) A Constitution for Living (Ven P.A. Payutto)**