



Research Article

MORALITY IN BUDDHISM AND PSYCHOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE
STUDY OF KOHLBERG'S STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT
AND THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

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ABSTRACT

When employed in a descriptive sense, morality possesses a crucial quality that "morality" in a normative meaning lacks: a quality that results from its relational aspect. This characteristic is that believing a particular account of what morality imbibes, in a descriptive manner, that does not bear on how an individual feels or behaves if they are not a part of a relevant group or society. The normative definition of morality is, nevertheless, accepted provided that characterization of moral agents and conditions supported by all moral agents and a code of conduct is accepted even as a moral code. Accepting a normative explanation of morality forces one to view certain behaviours as immoral, possibly even ones that they are tempted to engage in. This paper aims to understand what the term 'morality' means, closely examine and study the key differences between the moralist perspectives of Buddhism and psychology in order to further understand their approaches to life, parallelly, **Objective** : The objective of this paper is to compare and reflect on moralist perspectives of Buddhism and psychology within the given contexts of the title, in order to help understand their approaches to life parallelly. **Research Question** : How can morality be understood from Buddhist and Psychological perspectives? In what ways do the two approaches differ in shaping our understanding of morality?

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INTRODUCTION

The distinction between suitable (good) and improper (wrong) intentions, decisions, and acts known as morality (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2022), are a set of rules or guidelines that are drawn from social codes specific to a philosophy, society, religion or a norm that an individual feels ought to be universal. The concept and definition of morality varies across disciplines, cultures, religions and countries. Psychologists frequently employ a personological perspective when investigating how the self plays a part in moral motivation and action. Morality is understood in accordance to individual goals and differences in addition to being defined as a "good" human being.

While, according to the Buddhist perspective, developing loving-kindness (metta) and compassion as well as controlling one's ego and impulses inevitably leads to moral action (karuna). The Four Noble Truths, which form the basis of Buddhism, state that our cravings and ego-clinging are what lead to tension and suffering in life (dukkha). The Eightfold Path is the "programme," for letting go of desire and ego. The path includes mental discipline (executed through concentration and mindfulness) and wisdom, as well as ethical behavior (executed through speech, action, and livelihood).

This paper is an attempt to understand the term morality as a part of Buddhism and Psychology, with the help of two important ideas, namely, Moral Development according to Kohlberg's theory in Psychology and the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When approaching the anthropological perspective, Peterson and Seligman (2004) explored morality across cultures, geo-cultural regions, and millennia. They came to the conclusion that a few virtues have endured throughout all the cultures they looked at. They named transcendence, wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanism, justice, and temperance as the main qualities. Each of these is divided into various categories. For instance, love, generosity, and social intelligence are all aspects of humanity. However, it was later argued that morality is not always universal and that moral dilemmas frequently vary across cultural boundaries. Significant cultural disparities between various countries were revealed by a 2014 PEW research study on morality-related topics like homosexuality, abortion, divorce, alcohol consumption, extramarital affairs and premarital sex. Buddhist theology does not establish a basis for compassion as an active, outward contribution to the needs of others. According to Buddhist doctrine, a personal self or other-self does not exist. In actuality, desire and all pain in the world are based on

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the concept of a personal self. If this is the case, then helping someone in need directly cannot lessen their pain. Indeed, according to the Buddhist view of reality, such a thought would logically cause more suffering rather than lessen it. This paper will attempt to review and illustrate how this viewpoint adds value: First, to answer what is morality in Buddhism and Psychology. Second, What are the similarities and differences in the moral perspectives of the two approaches; and third, how do the above help us gain an understanding and modify our own approach in life.

Karma Lekshe Tsomo, a nun in ancient Tibetan Buddhist tradition and a professor in Theology states, Buddhism acknowledges that moral absolutes do not exist and that making ethical choices entails a complicated web of factors. The term "Buddhism" covers a broad range of activities and ideas, and the canonical scriptures allow for many different interpretations. People are urged to conduct extensive self-analysis because all of these are based on the principle of intentionality. People are instructed to consider their motivations—if factors like attachment, aversion, ignorance, insight, empathy – to instigate the ramifications of choices in context of the Buddha's lessons before making moral decisions."(Karma Lekshe Tsomo, 2021) According to the Buddhist perspective, developing loving-kindness (metta) and compassion as well as controlling one's ego and impulses inevitably leads to moral action (karuna).The Four Noble Truths, which form the basis of Buddhism, state that our cravings and ego-clinging are what lead to tension and suffering in life (dukkha). The Eightfold Path is the "programme," if you will, for letting go of desire and ego. The path includes mental discipline (executed through concentration and mindfulness) and wisdom, as well as ethical behaviour (executed through speech, action, and livelihood).

The Eightfold Path emphasizes on three components:

- Morality
- Concentration
- Wisdom

Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood make up the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path's moral discipline. Thomas Kiernan discusses the significance of partaking in the ethical engagement practise that the Eightfold Path recommends in the following way: The eight facets of the road are highly interrelated principles that must be viewed in connection to one another rather than as a list of discrete actions. For instance, ethical behaviour is regarded as a moral discipline standard that supports the other tenets of the route. The cultivation of ethical behaviour is the only way to accomplish mental purity, so while this feature is not self-sufficient, it is crucial. The Dalai Lama believes that we naturally make decisions that will result in our own well-being when we have a greater understanding of what motivates us. When we make decisions that promote our own wellbeing, we inevitably make decisions that promote the wellbeing of others. However, with the help of the Eightfold Path, to conduct the more in-depth work of understanding our internal motivation, we end up acting in ways that automatically promote the well-being of others, according to the Dalai Lama. In this manner, the Eightfold path's deeper level of self-inquiry is encouraged, requiring less effort to maintain ethical behaviour among individuals. (Lopez, D. S.,2022)

Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

According to his theory, moral development can be understood in three stages, with two stages under each stage. Kohlberg believed that every individual undergoes the three stages in a linear and fixed manner, further relating moral development to the development of cognition. The three levels of moral thinking are:

- Preconventional
- Conventional and
- Postconventional

The first or beginning stage of moral formation, also known as preconventional morality, usually lasts till the age of nine, where adult standards influence moral judgements and the consequences of abiding by them or not. In this stage, usually children lack a sense of personal moral compass. In the second stage or the conventional morality of development, acceptance is justified in accordance with norms pertaining to the society, governing the right and wrong. One begins to integrate ideal role models and respected individuals/ adults at the conventional level of moral standards. Rather than challenging authority, the individual then internalizes and accepts it. These reasons are built on the norms of the group they identify with. Social order and the obligations of relationships both emphasize social structures that must influence how we interpret what is morally good and bad. (Kohlberg, et al.,1977)

The last and final stage of development, also known as postconventional morality, is differentiated in accordance with an individual's understanding of generic ethical tenets. Even though these are not well designed, aspects like the survival and vitality of protecting one's life and worth of integrity are included. While individual judgement is said to be mainly based on self-selected principles, moral reasoning and judgement is dependent on the rights and justice of the individual. Although Kohlberg's theory has drawn a lot of criticism, it is reflected as one of the most crucial theories in the foundation of moral psychology. The emergence and development of moral reasoning occurring all through our lives and the idea of universality in the three stages are being studied and understood. The 3 stages that cycle throughout one's life, according to Kohlberg, can help gain important insights into the role of moral decisions in both children and adults and how choices and actions are led by moral thoughts. (Kohlberg, 1969)

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research study is quantitative as it is a comparative study of two schools of thought. I intend to collect data for the aspects and themes discussed in the paper. Peer reviewed articles, research papers, mainly theoretical and practices of Buddhists and Psychologists that support and help obtain the objective of this paper will be referred and given priority to. For many years, moral psychology largely ignored the self in its investigations. Instead, it emphasized the cognitive foundations and moral reasoning of judgments about good and bad (Kohlberg, 1969). The self-rejection and concentration on the workings of moral reasoning acted as a response to apparent ambiguity of then-dominant theories of the psychodynamic and inadequacy of empirical evidence to explain moral learning to explain certain concepts like "superego strength". (Kohlberg, 1963).

According to Buddhism, nothing is absolutely good or truly bad. There is no unfairness. Sin and the ultimate wrong do not exist. There is also no true right, virtue, or good to strive towards. There is no justice that could be hoped for. The only thing that matters is the practical outcome of a choice, and the only things that should actually worry us are enlightenment and Nirvana. This does not imply that Buddhists never act in a kind, giving, or helpful manner to fulfill the needs of others. It does, however, imply that when Buddhists act in this way, they are not doing so from the standpoint of their religion but rather from their deep-seated, divinely-given understanding that Buddhism is mistaken in this regard. Hence, a comparative study of the two ideas above through quantitative approaches of research papers, case studies, with collection and analysis of data and emphasis on theory will help attain greater knowledge and understand the world through the approaches mentioned above, thereby drawing empirical conclusions.

ANALYSIS

Although Buddhism analyses human psychology, emotion, cognition, behaviour, and motivation along with therapeutic techniques and the fact that Buddhist psychology is considered a subset of the larger Buddhist ethical and philosophical framework, the above information fuels various gaps as we compare the two disciplines. When two important philosophies or theories, like the eight fold path and Kohlberg's theory of moral development are discussed, there are many aspects to navigate, even in a broad context. For instance, Kohlberg states that there are six rooted stages that follow a linear path from childhood to adulthood. According to his theory, one of the major and key aspects of moral reasoning is pursuing justice and it is mainly observed in the form of these six stages in order. He explains that it is necessary for an individual to go through these stages in order to develop entirely. In early Buddhism, the noble eightfold path practices were introduced with the understanding that the body, mind and its functionality can easily be misused. Soon, people began to follow the Buddhist path that consisted of observing and restraining the self, with cultivating kindness and compassion to finally reach dhyana and samadhi, that reinforced these practices for the growth of an individual. Later Buddhism changed the notion by making insight (praj) the primary soteriological tool in their learnings; where the "objective" of the Buddhist noble eightfold path was later defined as putting an end to ignorance and rebirth. This path is also known as sila, samadhi and prajna in the Theravada tradition, that translate to morality, meditation and insight respectively. In one way, it can be implied that the eightfold path can be viewed as the 'ways of being' and a path to enlightenment through understanding ethics in the light of these eight elements or truths, according to Buddhism.

Further, Kohlberg's theory primarily focuses on cognition and cognitive development in lieu of understanding how individuals develop morals. Social choice and social justice also plays a vital role in this theory. There are other more hypotheses that make an effort to explain how morality evolved, specifically in relation to social justice. Some people belong to the transcendental institutionalist group, which aims to establish "perfect justice." Others, who concentrate more on ending injustices, are realization-focused. Social choice theory is one of the second group of theories. The goal of social

choice theory is to explain how people can use their input and preferences to have an impact on society as a whole. However, in Kohlberg's theory of moral growth, the concept of fairness is overemphasized. There are also gender and cultural biases that exist in civilizations valuing rights of individuals than cultures that value a community or society. His approach may not stay valid for the diversity in moral perspectives that collectivist civilizations may have. In this experiment, a majority of Kohlberg's subjects were young adults under the age of 16, which might have created a bias while drawing conclusions, making it exclusive and valid to one group of individuals only. Additionally, Carol Gilligan, one of Kohlberg's detractors, asserted that Kohlberg's hypothesis was skewed towards men because each subject in his sample identified as a man. Kohlberg believed that women tend to stay at the third level of development due to their larger focus on aspects like social welfare and connections. (Cherry, 2022)

The eightfold path, on the other hand, focuses on the broader, holistic and overall development of the individual to reach one main goal, enlightenment. Unlike Kohlberg's theory which states that every individual undergoes the six stages of moral development in order to evolve, the eightfold path is something that is practiced to attain nirvana. In Buddhism, this is looked at as a way in which humans can put an end to their suffering. But rather than stages, these distinct views act as directing principles that leads a path to enlightenment. It is said in Buddhism that these eight principles are crucial because they affect the next life of the individual, predicting their reincarnation as in their many subsequent lives. Kammais is acquired by moral behaviour (following the Noble Eightfold Path), and it has advantageous effects and bad deeds (not adhering to the Noble Eightfold Path) have bad results. Therefore, the universal eightfold path encompasses very few biases and gaps in terms of culture, age, gender, etc., carrying straightforward principles and encoding moral thoughts, actions and ethics in itself rather than directing to one aspect. The above key differences also indicate that social orders and structures are given importance to and considered heavily in Kohlberg's theory of moral development because the growth of each individual takes place in a society that adheres to certain rules, duties followed by moral actions and conduct. This is essential in order to be accepted in and as a part of society, within groups that construct and shape these rules. This concept is contrary to the Buddhist's to a large extent. Although different schools of thoughts and functionalities exist in Buddhism, they share the viewpoint that there are an endless number of universes. The three planes of existence are the realm of desire (Kama-loka in Pali and Arupa-loka in Sanskrit), the lowest of the planes, the realm of material form (Rupa-loka in Pali and Arupa-loka in Sanskrit), which is connected to states of meditation in which sensuous desire is at its lowest, and the realm of immateriality or formlessness. In Buddhism, it is strongly and universally believed that human existence is a privileged state. Humans can choose to perform good deeds, which will lead to a good rebirth, or bad deeds, which would lead to a poor rebirth, according to Theravada. In addition, they have the potential to become perfected saints. All of these abilities are explained in terms of a meticulously compiled list of dhammas (Sanskrit: dharmas), the impermanent existence of the elements. These shifting states appear, age, and vanish continuously. (Reynolds, et al. 2023) Hence, there is no proper societal structure, norms or

duties that Buddhism emphasizes on and roles one has to fulfill. Most systems are guiding principles leading you inward, to end suffering and reach nirvana in addition to staying connected and involved with the external world by practicing good deeds and ethics (right action, right speech, right livelihood) as stated in the eightfold path.

On one hand, this path has been established years ago and is largely followed by Buddhist monks and followers across cultures at present, instituting that the eight principles guide one to nirvana or enlightenment. Kohlberg asserts that the sixth stage of moral development, also known as the highest level of functioning, is almost unattainable. At this stage, one's self-selected ethical rules of conscience guide the proper course of conduct; making these ideas general and abstract in nature. What makes this stage unattainable is each individual's differing method of decision-making that entails subjective viewpoints of individuals or groups. (Sanders, et al., 2022) People uphold these internalized justice values even when they run counter to laws and regulations. Only about 10 to 15 percent of people, according to Kohlberg, ever get past the stages. According to an investigation, while stages one through four may be considered to be ubiquitous in communities around the world, stages five and six were incredibly rare in all populations. (Cherry, 2022) Therefore, the theory is actively developing along with being studied and understood all around the world.

LIMITATIONS/ GAPS IN THE STUDY

- 1) Lack of inter-relation or connecting various mechanisms in the study as a consequence of analyzing them in isolation—and not taking into account the intricacy and diverse nature of the psychological antecedents and implications of moral action.
- 2) Finding similarities that help assess how the two disciplines can benefit from each other in the modern and practical world, thereby interfering and defeating the purpose of this study.
- 3) Lack of a broader perspective of bounding concepts of morality like moral behaviours and judgements— as the study is limited exclusively to 'morality'.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to understand and draw clear differences between what morality is and how it is perceived within the two disciplines. However, in the course of studying the two concepts, it has also been understood that the two disciplines have many points of contact and interaction throughout history. This encompasses a descriptive phenomenology of mental states, emotions, and behaviours together bonded with theories of perception and mental influences. Western psychology, according to Buddhist masters like Jack Kornfield, provide Buddhists with complementary practises, while contemporary mental health experts like Jon Kabat-Zinn think that traditional Buddhist practises, such as the practise of mindfulness, have empirically therapeutic value.

At present, Buddhists are slowly inclining to examine human psychology, emotion, cognition, behaviour and motivation in addition to therapeutic methods. Buddhism's greater ethical and philosophical framework includes Buddhist psychology, and so, Buddhist psychology terminology has ethical overtones. Buddhist practices have recently been blended by

clinical psychologists, thinkers, and researchers into widely used organized psychotherapies. A number of psychological treatments have expressly included Buddhist mindfulness techniques. Furthermore, ancient Buddhist remedies for alleviating personal suffering are fundamentally similar to psychotherapies that deal with cognitive restructuring. Therefore, not only can their approaches be understood parallelly as explained in this paper, the two disciplines can work and exist in unison to explain and understand the constant alterations in how we perceive ourselves, each other and the natural environment.

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