

SELF AND OTHER (*ATTA AND PARA*) IN BUDDHIST ETHICS

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The problem of self and other is important in any ethical system. In this paper I propose to study this problem from a Buddhist point of view. Ethics is the field of study which focuses on the nature of human action in order to determine whether it is good or bad or right or wrong. The goodness or badness, or rightness or wrongness of ones actions arises mainly on how such actions affect oneself and the other, or the doer of the action and the receiver of its results. This is to say that if an action does not affect others then, according to the usually accepted concept of ethics, there is no ethical value in such an action we may say that if one is living an isolated life, like Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoes well known fictional story, then there is no way to classify his/her action from an ethical point of view.

When we look at the basic moral precepts taught by the Buddha, the five precepts (*pañcasīla*), we can see that at least the first four violations are not possible without the other who will have to be the victim. For instance, one cannot commit killing without one to be killed, a living being human or any other. It is the same with stealing, sexual misconduct and lying. The fifth rule related to taking alcoholic drinks or drugs may not have any direct victims other than one self although it may have many indirect victims. This shows that morality assumes the distinction between self and other. It is the same with crimes which are punishable mainly because such acts affect others adversely.

Usually in the world, among the worldly (*putujjana*) beings, we find that self upliftment or self- promotion is the usual practice. This can be explained with reference to the nature of the putujjana. The Pali term *putujjana*, *putu-jana* (*Skt. Prathag+jana*), refers to one who considers oneself as a separate, distinct, independent and unconnected person. This word itself indicates that the ordinary wording is self-centered or that

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she/he places him/herself higher than the others. According to the Buddhist analysis, *putujjana* have three main defilements (*kilesa*), namely, greed (*lobha*), anger (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*).

Of these, greed seems to play the prominent role as the key characteristic of all living beings who are not enlightened. In the four noble truth doctrine the Buddha identifies greed as the source of suffering. Although this does not mean that greed is the only reason, it highlights the importance of greed in determine the nature of the *putujjana*. Thus the *putujjana* is always self-centered and places him-self higher than the others. If we look at this situation from the problem of self and other we can see that self becomes more important than other. Now this creates problems, or causes suffering because not only self but also other too is equally self-centered. When everyone in a group thinks that one-self is the highest or most important naturally there will be problems, problems resulting from the clashes of autonomous individuals. In the teaching of the Buddha this characteristic of the *putujjana* mind is called 'upliftment of oneself (*attukkamsana*) which is inseparable from despising the other (*paravambhana*). Those who hold this mentality have the habit of enjoying sensual pleasures, which, the Buddha described in the Dhammacakkavattana-sutta as "engagement in sensual pleasures" (*kāma-sukhallika-anuyoga*).

Opposite to this mentality is the other extreme, namely, self-denial or self-negation. This is usually endorsed by certain religions, and the followers of such religions are encouraged to sacrifice oneself or one's interests for the sake of others. The English term expressing this idea is called "altruism" which is defined in Concise Oxford Dictionary as "selfless concern for the wellbeing of others". In the ancient India during the time of the Buddha this attitude was represented by those ascetics and Brahmins who practised severe forms of self-mortification (*atta-kilamatha-anuyoga*).

It is well known that the Buddha rejected both these views. According to the self and other problem we can interpret these two

extremes as giving prominence to self (at the expense of other) and giving prominence to others (at the expense of oneself)

According to Buddhism these two extremes are to be avoided. The Buddha neither uplifts self, nor does he negate self. Then what will be the Buddhist position? In the Buddha's teaching both one-self and other are treated alike. In his admonition to Rahula^{Thera}, the Buddha explains this position in the following words: *nevaattabyaabādhāya, napaṇḍityābādhāya, naubhayabyābādhāya*-not harmful to oneself, not harmful to other, and not harmful to both. In this explanation the Buddha takes into consideration both oneself and other equally. An action is bad if it causes harm to both and it is good if it is harmless to both. The Buddha does not deny one's self interest for the sake of other, or he does not deny the interests of the other for sake of oneself (doer of an action).

This position results from the view that all human beings are equal to one another. In one sense, Buddhism treats all living beings as equal in some important respects. In another sense, human beings are considered to be more fortunate than animals. But among human beings the Buddha denied that there was any difference by birth. This position is articulated in the discourses such as Vesat ha-sutta (Majjhimanikāya) and Vasala-sutta (Sutta-nipāta). A similar position is seen when the Buddha said that, comparing with oneself, one must avoid doing wrong to others (*attana upama katvā-nahaneyyanaghātaye*: Dhammapada: 129). One must not do to others what one will not let others to do to oneself. Self and other are treated as equal in this context

In the history of Buddhist tradition the debate over self and other has been a major issue among the later disciples of the Buddha. The standard criticism leveled by the Mahayanists against the so-called Hinayanists is that the arahant hood as the final goal was motivated by selfishness. It is believed that the bodhisattva concept gradually emerged in the Buddhist tradition in response to this perceived self interest in the ideal of arahant hood, unlike an arahant, bodhisattva is portrayed as one who sacrifices his own nirvana for the sake of the salvation of the others.

This paper shows that the self and other problem occupies an important place in the Buddhist religious and philosophical discussion. The paper also highlights the role played by this issue in the history of Buddhism in paving the way for emergence of the Mahayana tradition.

Keywords : Self, Other, *Arahant* concept, Selfishness