

Ethics, Being and Danger: Buddhist and Existentialist Approaches

Opening Conversation

1. The primary question for this week's session: What are the challenges and dangers to living ethically in an ever-changing world? Session one will attempt to provide an overview.
2. For early Buddhism the two main dangers to ethical were perceived as nihilism and eternalism. Out of the two it was nihilism that was seen to be the major danger to ethics as it allowed for the possibility of responsibility free action. There are resonances here of Dostoevsky's idea that "If God doesn't exist, then anything is permitted".
3. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta* the Buddha lists sixty different views that can be seen as either eternalist or nihilist. All these views, according to their proponents, are considered to *Dharma*. "These viewpoints thus grasped and adhered to will lead to such-and-such destinations ... This the Tathāgata knows, and more, but he is not attached to that knowledge. And being thus unattached he has experienced for himself he has experienced for himself perfect peace, and having truly understood the arising and passing away of feelings, their attraction and peril and the deliverance from them, the Tathāgata is liberated without remainder." (DN. i. 36) Given what is said here, is quietism the answer?
4. Could we find as many different possible forms of view in the contemporary world? If we can, are they responses to a rapidly changing world, a world we are trying to make sense of in terms of meaning?
5. Existentialists (a broad category that includes many different thinkers) places the primacy of 'being' as its central concern and ethics is formulated as a secondary, but important, concern. The danger is that making 'being' and authentic ways of living the focus, opens the possibility of a politics that falls into the extremes of both right and left (e.g., Heidegger and Sartre). The question we must ask is whether this is an inevitable outcome of the focus on the primacy of being?

6. Early Buddhism also focuses on being and the quality of an awakened way of living (one could refer to this as ‘authentic being-in-the-world’), yet appears, at first glance to eschew political considerations as part of ethics.
7. Aristotle sees ethics and politics as inextricably bound. Both his *Nicomachean Ethics* and his *Politics*, it has been remarked, should be bound together as a single volume.
8. How closely is the question of meaning tied up with ethics? Does early Buddhism and existentialism attempt to answer the question of ethics through meaning?
9. Are our ways of being a quest for meaning and identity, and how can these lead us astray ethically? Opens this as an issue inevitably leads to questions about the nature of self and Other, which we will look at in depth next week.
10. Ethics as at the very heart of Buddhist and existentialist thinking
11. Can the crisis of meaning be assuaged by *upādāna* – “The world lacks and hankers: beings are enslaved (*taṇhādāso*) by greed” (MN. II. 68) Greed displaces ethics as a way of being. As such, we find it difficult to get involved in social action and meaningful ethical behaviour.
12. “As for the Buddhist attitude towards social action or social change, let me inform you that most of our Western Buddhists tend to ignore that dimension altogether. For them Buddhism means meditation, which they practice in the extreme; that is why they would have nothing to do with social criticism or political matters. By such an abstention they have paved the way for escapism, or they accept the status quo of society unmindfully, especially in countries where there is much to be desired for social justice.” (Sulak Sivaraksa, 1985)

Digression on *taṇhā*

The Buddha denounced the fascism within us that makes us slaves of desire. The world is ablaze! Ablaze with what? “With the fire of *taṇhā*. The fire of greed – its passion is to consume – keeps the culture of ‘consumerism’ ablaze. The sanitized term for *taṇhā* in the economy of greed is ‘the profit motive’. Here, secular and religious views generally propagate the same discourse. If each unique individual single-mindedly craves his/her private aggrandizement, everyone will progress. The motor of society – its *upadhi*, is desire.

Everyone is *taṇhā*-crazed. Reification enables fetishization. Fetishization enables commodification. Everyone asks: 'What profit or merit will this transaction bring Me?' Since *taṇhā* is an infinite need, nothing can ever satisfy it; everything (everyone) is exchangeable for something else; everything is disposable when its particular desirability is exhausted. The ego's yearning and burning for infinite satisfaction is the 'within' of the same economy of *taṇhā* 'without'. The religions of success and the success of religions are mutually conditioned-conditioning forms of *taṇhā*. The culture of desire kindles the fire and offers straw to keep it alive. The need for straw is infinite, because straw burns quickly.

The above is a talking point and points to a an 'ethics' of contemporary culture. If you disagree, please try and articulate your disagreement rather than dismiss this as something you simply 'dislike'.