



The Middle Path as Fundamental Concept in Morality of Buddhism

Banpot Khathaisong

Master of Arts Programme in Buddhist Studies, Buriram Buddhist College
Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand
E-mail: banpot1975@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Eight-fold Path (*Atthaṅgika-magga*) is the road of moral living as well as the path of righteousness. It is composed of eight constituents, dealing with spiritual training, mental development and moral conduct. Another name for this Eightfold Path is the Middle Path. It is so named because this Path is meant to avoid both of the extremes viz., sensual pleasure and self-mortification. This Path was proclaimed by Lord Buddha for the first time when he gave the First Sermon to the five ascetics at Sarnath. This Path is discussed in the final of the Four Noble Truths. After the Buddha diagnosed the conflict (*dukkha-sacca*), he proceeded to expound upon the method that leads to the cessation of suffering (*dukkha-nirodha-gāminī-patipadā*), i.e. the Eight-fold Path.



1. Introduction

Buddhist ethics has been studied and understood by various scholars in many ways. Some hold that the ethical codes specified in the *Vinaya-pitaka* which outlines the regulations for monks and nuns are the essence of Buddhist ethics. Some say that the traditional exposition of the teaching in the *Visuddhimagga* (the path of purification), authored by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century A.D. is the standard summary of Theravāda Buddhist ethics although it is actually a text intended for yogins or monks. Some hold that the doctrine of the Buddha in *Singhālovādhā-sutta* is the key to Buddhist ethics although it is actually again a text intended for yogins or monks. Some hold that the doctrine of the Buddha in *Singhālovādhā Sutta* is the key to Buddhist ethics although it only applies to lay people. Although these views are partially true, they do not do justice to exposing Buddhist ethics in the light of the whole system of Buddhist texts and the overarching conception of Buddhist Philosophy.

These three views are only partially true because they use the materials which are relevant to only small sections of the Buddhist community. Therefore they provide an incomplete and misleading picture of Buddhist ethics. It is necessary to have a central ethical ideal that can be applied to every level of the community, whether monks, nuns, or lay-people. In this chapter we shall analyze what might be considered as the central idea of Buddhist ethics; namely, The Eight-fold Path to *Nibbāna*.

It must be borne in mind that, as mentioned in the last chapter, *Nibbāna* is the highest goal for which every Buddhist ought to wish for and work towards. It is the ultimate aim of Buddhism because it is the end of suffering. *Nibbāna* is not exclusively for any particular person, on the contrary, it is open to all. There is only one path leading to the Buddhist conception of *Nibbāna*: the Eight-fold Path. The Eight-fold Path is the central ethical doctrine that contains the essence of all kinds of Buddhist ethics. According to Buddhism, all human beings have the potential power to become perfect or reach *Nibbāna* (the end of suffering) if they follow the Eight-fold Path. The Buddha confirmed the fruit of pursuing the Path in *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta* to the Wanderer Subhadda. He said that the Eightfold Path exists only because of the *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* and that as long as people follow the Path, the world will forever have noble people and arahants.¹

Those who are living by the Middle Path or the Eightfold Path are living the 'holy life' (*brahmacariya*). The term 'holy life' refers to a lifestyle in accordance with all the Buddhist principles. It is often used as a synonym for Buddhism itself. As a saying of the Buddha goes: What is this Holy Life (*brahmacariya*)? Who are those who lead the Holy Life? And what is the goal of the Holy Life?

The Noble Path is composed of eight factors: (from) proper understanding... (to) proper concentration. These make up the Holy Life. Anyone who lives according to this Eightfold Path can be called a Brahma-farer (*brahmacārī*). The dissolution of lust (*rāga*), ill-will (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) is the goal of the Holy Life.²

According to the *Pāli* text cited above, the holy life is nothing but the Middle Path. The complete of Buddhist ethics is based on this Eightfold Path. Therefore, in this chapter, we shall investigate the essence of Buddhist ethics according to the system of the Middle Path by way of discussing three topics:

¹ *Dialogues of the Buddha, (Dīgha-Nikāya)* PTS., pp. 166-167.

² *S. V.*, p. 7, pp. 16-17.



1. The Prerequisites and factors leading to Proper Understanding
2. The Eightfold Path
3. The eight factors of the Path classified into the Three-fold Steps of Education.

1. The Basic Understanding of the Middle Path.

The Middle Path, or the forth Noble Truth, constitutes a summary of the principles of behavior and practice, or the complete system of Buddhist ethics. It is the section of teachings that will help us to progress to the goal of enlightenment according to the *dhammic* process that we have come to know. It represents the fruits of practice to be attained in real life. Or, we might say that it is a method that applies the principles of a natural process in order to realize the highest benefits in this life. Please consider the following passage and summary from the Buddhist canon. It will serve as a starting point for understanding the Middle Path.

Bhikkhus, there are two extremes that bhikkhus should avoid: engaging in self-indulgence of any kind, which is of a lower order and is not noble or beneficial; also, we do not get involved in self-mortification, which constitutes *dukkha* and is not noble or beneficial.

The Tathāgata reached enlightenment via this Middle Path that avoids these two extremes. The Path gives us eyes (sight), gives us insight (knowledge), and leads to peace, higher knowledge, enlightenment, and *nibbāna*.

What is this Middle Path? It is the Noble Path composed of eight factor; proper understanding (*sammāditthi*), proper thought (*sammāsaṅkappa*), proper speech (*sammāvācā*), proper action (*sammākammanta*), proper livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), proper effort (*sammāvāyāma*), proper mindfulness (*sammāsati*), and proper concentration (*sammāsamādhi*).³

The First Discourse or the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* summarizes the complete meaning, content, and aim of the Middle Path. We should note that while this Middle Path or Middle Way exists by avoiding the following two extremes, this does not simply mean remaining in the middle of any two extremes or taking a position of compromise in between two incorrect notions: the extreme of sensual indulgence or extreme hedonism (*kāmasukhallikānuyoga*); and the extreme of self-mortification or extreme asceticism (*attakilamathānuyoga*).

The Noble Path has eight factors. It is the way leading to the end of accumulation of *kamma*, that is, [from] proper understanding *sammadhitti*... [to] proper concentration (*sammāsamādhi*).⁴

Here, the Middle Way is crucial in putting an end to the accumulation of *kamma*. We should not misunderstand this to mean that this is the end of retribution and *kamma*, as many people have very narrowly come to understand it. We should not misunderstand this to mean that we can put an end to *kamma* by not performing *kamma* or not doing anything at all, which can begin to look like the doctrine of the Jain. Also, we should not misunderstand the Path to mean that putting an end to *kamma* involves quitting our usual activities, sitting still, and doing nothing.

First, putting an end to *kamma* means truly dedicating oneself to the task of its elimination. And this means acting according to the principles of the Middle Path, acting in according with a correct methodology, and discontinuing all incorrect activities.

³ *Vin.I. 10; S.V. 421.*

⁴ *A.III. 414.*



Second, as I have mentioned, extinguishing *kamma* does not imply sitting still and doing nothing. Rather, it means that we should cease our mundane activities and turn them into noble activities. To put it simply, common people are usually driven by craving and attachment; they are attached to notions of good and bad that relate to personal benefits and gain. The actions of common folk are, therefore, referred to in *dhammic* terms as “*kamma*” and are divided according to notions of good and bad that are adhered to with craving and attachment. When we stop acting with attachment to what is good and bad, and these notions of good and bad no longer exist, whatever we do can no longer be referred to as *kamma*, because *kamma* must be one or the other – either good or bad. The actions of noble people proceed, therefore, according to reason and what needs to be done within a particular context. Their actions have nothing to do with craving or the existence of internal attachments. Noble people do not perform bad deeds, because they no longer have any reason to do so (they lack the greed, ill-will, and delusion that would motivate them to do things merely for personal gain). They only perform good and beneficial acts because their actions are based on wisdom (*paññā*) and compassion (*karunā*). However, the “good” of these noble people is not limited to conventional ways of thinking; it is not a good that is related to personal gain. Whenever common folks do something good, they tend to hope for some kind of ultimate reward. And if there is no such obvious hope motivating their actions, there may be a more subtle wish for fame or acknowledgement; or even more subtle than this, they may cling to their good deeds as something that gives them inner warmth or self-satisfaction. As for noble people, when they do something beneficial, they only do this according to a proper purpose, goal, or reason, or because it is necessary in a particular context. *Dhammic* language, therefore, does not refer to this as *kamma*. The Path or Middle Way is a method of practice for getting rid of this *kamma*. All that remains is functional activity. This is the difference between the mundane (*lokiya*) and the supramundane (*loguttara*). Lord Buddha and arahants act beneficially and teach people without creating *kamma* – even though these actions are referred to by common people as “good”.

What is this Holy Life (*brahmacariya*)? Who are those who lead the Holy Life? And what is the goal of the Holy Life?

The Noble Path is composed of eight factors: [from] proper understanding... [to] proper concentration. These make up the Holy Life. Anyone who lives according to this Eight-fold Path can be called a Brahma-farer (*brahmacārī*). The dissolution of lust (*rāga*), ill-will (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) is the goal of the Holy Life.⁵

The term “Holy Life” is often understood in a narrow way, referring only to monastic chastity and abstaining from sexual intercourse, which is only one sense of the word.⁶ Actually, Lord Buddha used the term to refer to a lifestyle in accordance with all of the Buddhist principles, or it was often used as a synonym for Buddhist style of life itself. This first occurred when Lord Buddha sent his disciples out to spread the religion. He told them to go out and proclaim the Holy Life.⁷ And Lord Buddha said that the Holy Life will prosper when the four assemblies of Buddhist devotees – monks (*bhikkhu*), nuns (*bhikkhunī*), male laity (*upāsaka*), and female laity (*upāsikā*) –

⁵ S.V. 7, 16-17, 26-27.

⁶ The Commentaries (*MA.II. 41*) explain the Holy Life in twelve different ways. Some of the most important are: the whole of the Religion, following and practicing the Eight-fold Path, the four Sublime States of Mind (*brahmavihāra*), gift-giving (*dāna*), being steadfast to your mate, abstaining from sexual intercourse (*methunadhamma*), and so on.

⁷ *Vin.I. 20-21.*



along with the Brahma-farers and householders know and practice the *Dhamma* well together.⁸ Here, *brahmacariya* can be translated as living the Holy Life and as leading an excellent life. According to the *Pali* texts cited here, the Holy life is nothing but the Middle Path, and the *Brahma-farers* are those who are walking the Middle Path.

Ananda, having a good spiritual friend (*kalyānamitta*) amounts to whole of the Holy Life, because those who have found a good friend⁹ ... have the desire to progress along the Noble Eight-fold Path, and they will make great strides down this path.¹⁰

Bhikkhus, when the sun is rising, its rays break the horizon before it does; these rays are a foreshadowing of things to come. In the same way, having a good spiritual friend is a good sign, a foreshadowing of the Noble Eight-fold Path.¹¹

These passages show the importance of having the support of good people in everybody's daily life, people who will provide leadership and set an example of the proper practice of the *dhammic* principles.

Bhikkhus, I do not support the incorrect way (*micchāpatipadā*) for *bhikkhus* or for laity. Bhikkhus and laity alike who practice incorrectly and are not successful in proceeding along the Noble Path can attribute this to their improper practice. What is the incorrect path? It is improper understanding (*micchādītthi*)... improper concentration (*micchādītthi*).

I uphold the proper way (*sammāpatipadā*) for *bhikkhus* and for laity. Bhikkhus and laity alike who practice correctly meet with success along the Noble Path. They depend on their correct practice for this. What is the proper way? It is proper understanding (*sammādītthi*)... proper concentration (*sammāsamādhi*)....¹²

Passages that mention the incorrect and correct paths have already been cited. These earlier passages explain the process of the arising of *dukkha* as *micchāpatipadā*. The passages cited here referring to the Path reveal the same factors in the process cited earlier. However, as we now can see, the Path is presented and applied to daily practice as a system of behavior, and *sammāpatipadā* is nothing but the Middle Path.

2. The Prerequisites and Factors Leading to Right Understanding (*Sammā dītthi*)

As we have said earlier, the Eightfold Path is the most complete ethical system in Buddhism. In the process of practicing, it starts with Proper Understanding (*sammā dītthi*). Proper Understanding is necessary before one can arrive at Proper Concentration (*sammā samādhi*). Once Proper Understanding is gained, it is not difficult to reach the following factors because these factors support and build upon one another. However, Proper Understanding is the key channel to penetrate into the subsequent seven. The development of Proper Understanding is of utmost importance. In the *Pāli* text, the Buddha shows the factors that contribute to the arising of Proper Understanding:

⁸ M.I. 490-494.

⁹ The term *kalyānamitta* does not simply mean friend. Rather it refers to someone – be it a monk, guru, teacher, friend, or helper – who makes valuable suggestions and provides direction and spiritual support.

¹⁰ S.V. 2.

¹¹ S.V. 29-30.

¹² S.V. 18-19; *ñāyadhamma* = *lokuttaramagga*, *saccadhamma*, and *nibbāna*.



Friends, how many factors contribute to the arising of Proper Understanding? There are two factors contributing to the arising of Proper Understanding: having a spiritual teacher from whom you can learn (*paratoghosa*) and having a capacity for and use of systematic, critical reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*).¹³

In another two passages, the Buddha shows the importance of these two factors as prerequisites of the Eightfold Path:

Just as, Monks, the dawn is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of sun, so friendship with good people is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of the Noble Eightfold Way.¹⁴

Just as, Monks, the dawn is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of the sun, so systematic attention and critical reflection are the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of the Noble Eightfold Way.¹⁵

Putting it in the most simple terms, the Buddha shows that there are both external and internal factors which enable the practitioners to enter the stream of the Eightfold Path toward *Nibbana*. The external factor is *paratoghosa* (listening to others, listening to the suggestions and teaching of others); the internal factor is *yonisomanasikāra* (engaging the mind, considering matters thoroughly in an orderly and logical manner through the application of critical and systematic reflection). These two factors are the junction between men and the teaching of the Buddha, i.e. the Eightfold Path. In his book, *Buddhadhamma*, P.A. Payutto emphasizes the importance of these two factors thus:

Once the teaching of others are put into practice and applied to a system of learning or training, we must consider if the guidance we have received is good enough to allow us to reach the final goal: Is the teacher well prepared? Does the teacher have the proper abilities? Is the teacher offering a method of training that will bear fruit?, Therefore, in the system of Buddhist learning and training, we initially set our sights on observing the teachings of others, supported by a principle of spiritual friendship (*kalyānamitta*) or receiving spiritual advice from good friends, along with a second factor, critical reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*), a principle based on wisdom that contemplates how teachings should be correctly applied.¹⁶

2.1. Listening to the Teachings of Others (*Paratoghosa*)

In the process of entering the Eightfold Path, positive guidance is essential. When analyzing the term *paratoghosa* (listening to the teaching of others) it is important to note the Pāli word *kalyānamitta* (having spiritual friends). *Kalyānamitta* refers to “a person who is well prepared with the proper qualities to teach, suggest, point out, encourage, assist, and give guidance for getting started on the Path of Buddhist training.”¹⁷ Having associations with such a spiritual friend, we will gain better insight into the Path.

¹³ M. I., P. 294.

¹⁴ S. V., p. 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Phra Prayudh Payutto, *Buddhadhamma*, p. 224.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 225.



The Buddha as well as *arahants* exemplify the concept of spiritual friends for human beings. In his own words, the Buddha pointed out the supreme value of spiritual friendship as follows:

Ananda, having a good spiritual friend... encompasses the whole of the Holy Life, because a person with a spiritual friend... can hope for the following: developing the Eightfold Path and making the most of it. By depending on us as spiritual friends, beings who are normally subject to birth (*jāti*) can break free of birth; people normally subject to decay (*jarā*) can break free of death; people who are subject to sorrow, lamentation, suffering, grief, and distress can break free... (of these).¹⁸

From the above quotation, we can grasp the importance of spiritual friends from the Buddhist perspective. The Buddha confirms that merely having a good spiritual friend encompasses the whole of the Holy Life. This point should not be missed or overlooked because it shows the first step that is needed to enter the Path.

Friendship is an important part of life, and the friends with whom we associate with have an effect on our progress and digression within life. At the time of adolescence, association with a friend may be a turning point for someone's life. Therefore, screening the qualities of people before making friendship is the appropriate thing to do. In *Dhammapada*, the Buddha instructs us to avoid bad friends and friends and to associate with only good people. He says: "One should not associate with friends who are evil-doers nor with persons who are despicable; associate with friends who are virtuous, associate with the best of men."¹⁹ The result of association with such good people will improve us day by day. The Buddha also said, "If a person sees a wise man who reproaches him (for his faults), who shows what is to be avoided, he should follow such a wise man as he would be a revealer of hidden treasures. It fares well and not ill with one who follows such a man."²⁰

The term *kalyānamitta* in the ultimate sense does not only mean "good friend:" rather, it refers to the Buddhist concept of spiritual friend. In *Visuddhimagga*, *kalyānamitta* refers to the Lord Buddha, his disciples, and learned, wise men who are able to teach the *Dhamma* even though they may be younger than those whom they teach.²¹ One might ask how one is expected to know the difference between the good and the bad spiritual friends. For the persons who will act as good spiritual friends, it is imperative to be endowed with the following qualities:

1. He is endearing, friendly to others, endowed with a heart of compassion and easily approachable (*piyo*).
2. He possesses good conduct which inspires confidence in others and is respectable (*guru*).
3. He is a learned and well established in his training, his friends respect and praise him although he does not need such praise, he gives all who meet him a good impression (*bhāvaniyo*).
4. He is skillful in communication, i.e. he can make others understand clearly what he wants to tell them. In others words, he can make difficult subjects easier for them to grasp (*vattā*).

¹⁸ S. V., p. 4.

¹⁹ *Dh.*, verse 78.

²⁰ *Dh.*, verse 76.

²¹ See *Vism*, pp. 99-100.



5. He listens to others with patience, understanding and attentiveness. He endures criticism, objections and irrational speech even if the person talking is disrespectful or unkind. He responds to that person with good counsel derived from his good heart (*vacanakkhamo*).

6. He can expound in depth on profound points, he can make these points clear to his friends and help resolve their problems or questions in the proper way (*gumbīrañca katham kattā*).

7. He will definitely not mislead his friends in the wrong way or wrong direction (*no ca atthāne niyojaye*).²²

For all average people, a good spiritual friend is needed in life. The Buddha encouraged us to have such spiritual friends and then to “let them admonish, let them instruct, let them restrain from the impure. They become beloved of the good and hated by the evil.”²³ The purpose of having spiritual friends, in the ultimate sense, is to help us toward cessation of *dukkha* (suffering). The Buddha speaks of the good results of having a spiritual friend as follows:

They will be virtuous, well-mannered, and aware of the rules of the order (*pātimokkha*); they will be whole, both in terms of thoughts and deeds.

They will have the opportunity to hear and discuss various ideals with ease as they see fit. The discussion of these ideals with hewn and polish their character, cleanse their minds, and make them bright. These ideals are containment, ...effort, moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*), wisdom (*paññā*), liberation (*vimutti*), and knowledge of liberation (*vimuttiñānadassana*).

They will be people whose efforts are well established so that they can put an end to unwholesome things (*akusala-dhamma*) and practice wholesome things (*kusala-dhamma*) until they are erected ; they will be strong and not shish their duties towards what is wholesome.

They will be wise, composed of noble wisdom, fully realizing the arising and passing away of unwholesome tendencies (*kilesa*), which leads to the complete elimination of *dukkha*.²⁴

2.2. Applying Critical or Systematic Reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*)

As mentioned, the first factor (having a spiritual friend) is the external factor which leads to the Eightfold Path. Going hand in hand with this external factor is an internal factor: systematic attention or reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*). “As an internal factor, I see nothing that leads to such great benefit as critical reflection,”²⁵ the Buddha declared. Internal reflection is the ability to think clearly, to look at things with critical eyes, breaking them down into their constituent factors and analyzing their causal reflection play a primary role; it eradicates ignorance and other defilements. Apart from that, critical reflection helps develop our ability of thought, culminating in a highly developed level of wisdom. The developed thought must be structured, reasoned and in harmony with causes and conditions.²⁶ In the Buddhist text, various methods of systematic reflections are given. P.A. Payutto in his *Buddhadhamma* enumerates ten methods of “how to think”²⁷ as found in Buddhist texts. What follows are the ten methods of how to think.

²² A. IV., 32, and see P.A. Patutto, *A Constitution for Living*, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1996), p. 76.

²³ *Dh.*, verse 77.

²⁴ *Ud.*, pp. 36-37.

²⁵ A. I., p. 17.

²⁶ P.A. Payutto, *A Constitution for Living*, p. 81.

²⁷ Phra Rājavarāmunī (P.A. Payutto), *Buddhadhamma* (Thai Version), (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, 1985), pp. 675-727.



1. *Thinking in terms of searching for cause and condition*

This is the method of thought with regard to the law of nature. The law of nature states simply that ‘when this is, that is, this arising, that arises; when this is not, that is not, this ceasing, that ceases.’²⁸ As mentioned in Chapter Two this is called Dependent Origination (*paticcasamuppada*) or conditionality. According to this law, all phenomena are subject to causation. When we perceive something or some result, we can be assured that it arises from a cause or condition. This method of thought requires us to investigate the cause and condition.

2. *Thinking by way of division*

Upon perception of something, we divide it into various and smaller constituents. For example, man is divided into two main parts: mind and body. And mind can be further subdivided into more components: feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. Out of these components, feeling can be further divided into happiness, unhappiness and difference. In other words, this method of thought is concerned with categorization of the elements of thought.

3. *Thinking in the light of Four Noble Truths*

Upon perceiving something, we must realize that whether it comes to our perception or not, it is subject to three important characteristics: impermanence, change and non-self. Hence, when something occurs against our wishes, we should not be disturbed. Everything occurs according to the law of nature not according to our wishes.

4. *Thinking in light of Four Noble Truths*

This way of thought is based upon observing the problems or phenomena and focusing upon their causes with an intention to find a solution. Wherever the cause of the problem is found we can begin to solve the problem by attempting to eradicate the roots of problems. This method of thought is similar to the first method in that it goes beyond pure conditionality and attempts to solve the problem through an application of one of the Four Noble Truths.

5. *Thinking in the terms of benefit and harm*

In doing any action or thinking any thought, the practitioner should be aware of the principle, aim or purpose of that project. By being aware of the aim of an action the practitioner can judge whether that action is moral or not.

6. *Thinking in terms of benefit and harm*

This a way of thinking is to look at everything in the light of quality of the benefit or harm which results from that particular thing. The Buddha encourages us not to limit our thinking to our specific tendencies and our hopes for desired outcomes but rather to see all the facets of the things of which we think. In other words, we ought to look at all things from as many perspectives as possible.

7. *Thinking in terms of true value and artificial value*

This types of thought can be applied in daily life regarding the consumption of various goods. In the consumption of goods, there are two kinds of value: true value and artificial value. For example, the value of a piece of cloth is a true value because the cloth can protect our bodies

²⁸ M. III., p. 63.



from heat and cold. The cloth's artificial value is the praise wearer may expect from others complimenting his taste, praising him for having chosen a popular brand.

8. *Thinking by the way of arousing or cultivating virtue*

This type of thought refers to mental power. All of us perceive various experiences in our daily life. Mental power plays important role in that perception. This method involves the manipulation of our perception so that we may see things in a positive way. On perceiving a situation, one may feel sad or one may use the difficult situation as an opportunity to gain inspiration and do a lot of good things. Although our methods of perception may arise because of previous tendencies, it must not be forgotten that we have the power to create and cultivate new, virtuous methods of encountering the world.

9. *Thinking which emphasizes the here and now*

This method of thinking involves paying more attention to the present moment rather past or future. This is a way of using Right Mindfulness (*sati*). According to this way of thought, being concerned with the past or future is a waste of valuable time and energy. The essence of this method of thought involves focusing upon what we are doing here and now: reading, walking, singing, etc.

10. *Thinking in the light of analysis*

According to this method of thought, the value of things should be made by dividing them into different categories and analyzing their many facts, pointing out the qualities of those divisions, and reasoning which ones are worth integrating into life and which ones ought to be discarded. This method of thinking is similar to the second method in that it involves division. It differs, however, in that it also involves analysis and judgment of those divisions.

Through ten methods of thought, the value of things should be made by dividing them into different categories and analyzing their many facets, pointing out the qualities of those divisions, and reasoning which ones are worth integrating into life and which ones ought to be discarded. This method of thinking is similar to the second method in that it involves division. It differs, however, in that it also involves analysis and judgment of those divisions.

These ten methods of critical reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*) are one of the factors leading to Proper Understanding (*sammāditthi*). As the Buddha confirmed:

I see nothing that brings about Proper Understanding (*sammāditthi*) that has yet to arise or make Proper Understanding that has arisen continue to prosper like critical reflection. When there is critical reflection, then Proper understanding that has yet to arise arises and Proper Understanding that has already been established continues to prosper.²⁹

Critical reflection is an internal factor necessary for those follow the Middle Path. In order to attain wisdom, one must develop his thought processes; indeed, he must train himself how to think. Phra Debvedi reflects on the importance of how to think:

Today, how to think is an emphasis in education. Truly, children, and all people alike, should be taught how to think. Many people, however, refer to 'how to think' only in terms of scientific or intellectual thinking. They do not touch the true nature of the mind and thus

²⁹ A. I., 31.



leave the thinking process unsound and defective. Their ‘how to think’ is therefore too short to realize the aim of education, that is, to develop the individual man so that human problems will be rightly solved and a good life will be attained too. With the phase of normal thought, the thinking process of ‘how to think’ is complete. In this right process of thinking, intellectual thought and moral thought become integrated.³⁰

We can conclude that at first, a person who lacks sufficient wisdom must depend on the guidance of others, which is the external factor. By this external factor, that person gains confidence. He later goes beyond this initial level of confidence: taking the foundation of understanding well established with confidence, he uses that understanding to gain freedom of thought for the continued application of critical reflection. This accomplishment brings about proper Understanding (*sammāditthi*). This process of the two prerequisites of the Path and the Eight-fold Path can be illustrated by the following flowchart:

Association with good people → Attending to the study of the *Dhamma* → confidence → critical reflection → the Proper Understanding.

3. The Conclusion

In fact, this Path is not an invention of Lord Buddha. It is an ancient path that has been trodden before by many *arahants*. The Buddha is only the person who formally recognized, shared, and began the teaching about this Path. As a saying of the Buddha goes:

Just as if, O Monks, a man faring through the forest sees an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by men of former days, and he were to go along it and going along it should see an ancient city...even so, I, O Monks, have seen an ancient path, an ancient road traversed by the rightly Enlightened Ones of the former times. And what, O Monks, is the ancient path, that ancient road traversed by the rightly Enlightened Ones of former times? It is just this Noble Eightfold Path... I have gone along that path, and going along the path, I fully came to know Formations, the uprising of Formations, the cessation of Formations and the way leading to the cessation of Formations.³¹

The word ‘path’ implies a trail that has been trodden by someone before. The Buddha uses this word instead of ‘cure’ or ‘remedy’ of suffering because this Path is not simply a panacea, it requires the devoted focus and determination of the person embarking on the Path. Had the Buddha called the Eightfold Path the ‘Eightfold Cure’, it would give the impression that the eight factors did not require any labor on the part of the ‘patient’. By using the term ‘path’ the Buddha makes it clear that the person must trod the Path himself in order to attain enlightenment. But it must always be borne in mind that the term ‘path’ is only a figurative expression. Though conventionally we talk of treading a path, in the ultimate sense the eight steps signify eight mental factors. They are interdependent and interrelated, and at the highest level they function simultaneously, they are not followed and practised one after the other in numerical order.³² Dr. Walpola Rahula comments about the Path in his work ‘*What the Buddha Taught*’:

³⁰ Phra Debvedī, *Freedom: Individual and Social*, (Bangkok: Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1990), p. 46.

³¹ *Kindred Saying II.*, p. 74.

³² Piyadassi Thera, *The Buddha’s Ancient Path*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1987), p. 78.



Practically the whole teaching of the Buddha, to which he devoted himself during 45 years, deals in some way or other with this path. He explained it in different ways and in different words to different people, according to the stage of their development and their capacity to understand and follow him. But the essence of those many thousand discourses scattered in the Buddhist scriptures is found in the Noble Eight-fold Path.³³

The Eight-fold Path, therefore, is the most perfect doctrine concerning with the Code of Ethics in Buddhism. Every aspect of the ethical code ranging from the most subtle to the most profound is available in this Eight-fold Path. And by following this Path, the practitioner can reach the end of suffering. This is the only way that leads to the highest aim of life.

Bibliography

- Barua, B. **A History of Pre-Buddhistic Indian Philosophy**. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1971.
- Bhagwat, N.K. **The Buddhistic Philosophy of the Theravada School as Embodied in the Pali Abhidhamma**. Patna: University of Patna, 1929.
- Brahmacari, S. **An Introduction to Abhidhamma**. Calcutta: Jadab Barua Publications, 1979.
- Buddhadasa Bhikkhu. **Dhamma—The World Saviour**. Bangkok: Mahamakut Buddhist University, 1969.
- Conze, Edward. **Buddhist Thought in India**. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1962.
- Dwivedi, A.N. **Essential of Hinduism Jainism and Buddhism**. Delhi: Book Today, 1979.
- Eliot, Sir Charles. **Hinduism and Buddhism**. Vol. I. London: Edwin Arnold, 1921.
- Hindery Roderick. **Comparative Ethics in Hindu and Buddhist Traditions**. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1979.
- Humphreys, Christmas. **Karma and Rebirth**. London: John Murray, 1949.
- Inkrungkao P. Prasit. **The Problem of Dukkha and Its Solution in Theravada Buddhism**. Madras: Ph.D. Thesis of Madras Christian College, 1999.
- Jennings, J.G. **The Vedantic Buddhism of the Buddha**. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1974.
- Rahula, Walpola. **What the Buddha Taught**. New York. Grove Press, 1959.
- Rhys Davids, C.A.F. **The Birth of Indian Psychology and Its Development in Buddhism**. London: Luzac & Co., 1936.
- Rhys Davids. **Buddhist India**. 1903; rpt. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 1987.
- Rongthong Thongsoon. **The Concept of Man in Early Buddhist Text**. Varanasi: Ph.D. Thesis of Banaras University, 1984.
- Ross, Floyd H., **The Meaning of Life in Hinduism and Buddhism**. London: Roulledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1969.
- Swearer, D.K. **Me and Mind: Selected Essays of Bhikkhu Buddhadasa**. Delhi: Srisatguru Publications, 1991.

³³ Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 46.