Best Paper 2 Buddhism 2022

**Analyze the importance of *sila* (morality) in Buddhism.**

Sila, or morality, is important in Buddhism’s foundations because it embraces Buddhists’ commitment to achieving the harmony of self-restraint with the primary motivation being nonviolence or freedom from causing harm. Buddhist morality stems from the traditional teachings of values by the Buddha; the Buddha’s teachings, through the Five Precepts, Eightfold Path, Six Paramitas, and Four Noble Truths, convey how one should act towards others and think in accordance with the driving values of compassion and kindness. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to be free of suffering, or to reach “enlightenment.” To achieve this, the Buddha teaches that one must break out of their own ego, which comes from external factors and validation, by acting upon kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna). By following a set of ethics and moral conduct that all emphasize metta and karuna, we can make headway towards “waking up” and reaching that ultimate goal of enlightenment. Buddhism believes that sila creates a sense of harmony and balance in society that takes us away from our ego and into our societal contributions and compassion. However, different types of Buddhism place a different emphasis on sila based on their respective end goals.

In Buddhism, sila is laid out by its foundational values common to all types of Buddhism embedded in the Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, 6 Paramitas, and Five Precepts. The Four Noble Truths outline how one should identify and treat suffering. It starts in the first phase, dukkha, by identifying that life is dissatisfaction. After finding the cause of the suffering in Tanha, one realizes that the cause is solely themselves and their mind. In the treatment phases, the Eightfold Path sets the prescription for a cure for suffering. This is through having right view, which means to have understanding about the reality of things in accordance to the Buddha’s teachings. It also involves having the right intention—cultivating an unshakable commitment to tread the path to enlightenment. The third element is having the right speech, which is about cultivating the virtue of addressing others with kindness, while abstaining from lying, divisive or abusive speech. This is connected back to Buddhism’s core value of metta (compassion), as it makes Buddhists treat others with respect and kindness. Similarly, right livelihood refers to making a living in a way that harms no one and benefits all—this is connected to Buddhism’s value of collective behavior. We can also see this in right effort, which refers to striving to abandon all thought and action that is harmful to oneself or others to cultivate virtues that benefit oneself and others. Right mindfulness refers to focused awareness of the body and mind and the phenomena arising within and affecting each; this brings out the spiritual side of Buddhism that emphasizes meditation to be closer to the Buddha, which brings one closer to enlightenment. Right concentration is about cultivating the four states of concentration leading to equanimity beyond pleasure and pain. Ultimately, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path all emphasize the importance of setting standards and pathways for how one should act to uphold the Buddhist value of metta while centering oneself enough (as seen in phases of reflection like dukkha) to reach the final goal of enlightenment, which is why sila is significant in emphasizing Buddhist beliefs.

Furthermore, the Six Paramitas, which are generosity, morality, patience, joyful effort, concentration, and wisdom, all outline the core teachings of Buddhism across all types. These virtues are believed to bring one to enlightenment as they describe the true nature of an enlightened being. Thus, Buddhists believe that those who exemplify the virtues outlined in the Six Paramitas are in their own true Buddha nature. The Six Paramitas also relates to the idea that previous practice helps form basis for the next. It is hard to practice morality if we are attached to our possessions -- therefore, we need to practice generosity to detach from those possessions. The Six Paramitas also relate to how sila, morality, is balanced out with prajna, which is understanding or wisdom, and samandhi, which is concentration. These three elements are balanced out to enhance one another: without understanding and wisdom, one would not be able to fully embody what they know and have learned to be sila. Additionally, the Five Precepts, which are commitments to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and intoxication, outline how one can develop their character to advance on the path to enlightenment. It furthers the idea that, in Buddhism, one must find peace within by practicing compassion (metta), instead of seeking rewards from external forces like intoxication. This relates to sila as it outlines how one can detach from external validation and find peace within to reach enlightenment.

While concepts outlined in the Five Precepts, Six Paramitas, Eightfold Path and Four Noble Truths are general throughout Buddhism, each type of Buddhism has a different emphasis on sila. Theravada Buddhism is all about staying close to what the historical Buddha taught, which can be seen in the Pali Canon, where the Buddha’s original teachings were recorded for the first time. In the Dhammapada, the most famous part of the Pali Canon, it is said that by abstaining from evil, one is practicing self-control over the body, speech, and mind, which emphasizes Theravada Buddhism’s emphasis on mindfulness and cleansing one’s own mind. Hence, in Thervada Buddhism, sila is seen as the driving force of one's ability to achieve this mindfulness since by practicing moral disciplines like abstinence from stealing, one is actively enhancing their self and mind control. In the Dhammapada, verses also emphasize how, to stop hatred from spiraling into a self-expanding cycle, one must combat hatred with non-hatred, forbearance, and love. It says that when one feels wronged by others, they must be patient and forgiving; they must control their anger as a means of self-discipline and mind control as well. This further enhances the idea that in Theravada Buddhism, conscious efforts in controlling anger and practicing sila are actually also contributing to the larger Theravada goal of achieving mindfulness.

The ultimate goal in Theravada Buddhism is to become an arhat, which is a being who has reached the state of enlightenment. This is done through individual meditation which leads to gaining arhat pranna (wisdom). Because Theravada Buddhists make the arhat its spiritual hero, celebrating holidays like Vesak, they recognize the arhat’s detachment from the world as the moral goal, driven by sila foundations like the Five Precepts. They recognize how this detachment was achieved, which is fundamentally through practicing sila, because this detachment from the world is what allowed the arhat to reach the ultimate goal of nirvana, which Theravada Buddhists celebrate.

On the other hand, in Mayahana Buddhism, which is the more reformed version of Buddhism practiced in countries like Taiwan, begins with the basics of Thervada, which emphasizes the importance of the Eightfold Path and Four Noble Truths, but it has a further element of karuna compassion. Now, Buddhism becomes more of a group experience. Unlike Thervada Buddhism, which emphasizes developing arhat pranna (wisdom), Mahayana Buddhism aims to develop bodhisattva pranna and karuna (compassion). In attaining bodhisattva pranna, sila is viewed similarly to how Thervada Buddhists would view the Eightfold Path and Five Precepts as guiding tools for reaching enlightenment. However, the second part, which is karuna, emphasizes the idea that one often would stay in the cycle of samsara out of compassion for others. In this sense, morality or sila is seen as one’s ability to practice compassion for others by helping them.

Master Cheng Yen and the Tzu Chi foundation in Taiwan is an example of how Mahayana Buddhists have practiced compassion as a means of sila. Master Cheng Yen is seen to some as having attained bodhisattva pranna; she devoted her life to philanthropic work which can be seen in her Tzu Chi Foundation. “Tzu” means compassion and “Chi” means relief; this is central to how the foundation was established. It was established when Master Cheng Yen wanted to offer help to the impoverished in her native Taiwan. Tzu Chi focuses on community service and outreach: medical, educational, and disaster relief. They have medical programs that provide relief during times of environmental disasters like Hurricane Ian. Its influence has spread to over 100 countries. Master Cheng Yen’s Tzu Chi Foundation embodies how compassion (karuna) can be attained by practicing generosity, which is emphasized in sila. Hence, Tzu Chi shows how sila is a guiding principle of how one can find detachment from one’s ego, which is in Buddhism’s ultimate goal, by practicing compassion and actively helping others.

Furthermore, sila is also different in Tibetan Buddhism, which emphasizes tantric practices such as deity yoga. In many Tibetan Buddhist practices, we can see active surrendering from oneself and one’s ego. In deity yoga, one’s mind is concentrating so hard on a bodhisattva that it detaches from one’s sense of self and merges from this bodhisattva. This act of removal and detachment from one’s ego relates to how sila in Tibetan Buddhism is about recognizing that there is a force greater than oneself and surrendering to it will allow peace to prevail. Furthermore, making sand mandalas is a meditative practice in Tibetan Buddhism that reflects a similar sense of detachment. They start by visualizing the mandalas for perception, then, after rigorous work in making the sand mandalas, they destroy it. When several mandalas melt together, they transform into a multi-colored lotus. The mixture of sand then gets poured into a body of water. Destroying something that one put a lot of work into mastering relates to the Buddhist idea of impermanence; nothing is permanent, so one should not cling onto something so tightly hoping that it will make them content. Destroying something so beautiful that required immense skill also relates to the idea of separating from one’s ego -- it is not about the destination, but rather the process of getting there. This relates to sila as Tibetan Buddhism sees morals as guiding principles in this long journey of surrendering one’s ego to identify a greater force that can’t be found so long as one is fixated on their prides and egos.

Sila is seen as the guiding principle for teaching Buddhists how to curate their actions to match the state of mind and spirit they are trying to attain in enlightenment. Across different types of Buddhism, however, sila is adapted to align with the varying goals and emphases of each type of Buddhism. In Thervada Buddhism, practicing sila is practicing active mind control, which achieves that arhat pranna that Thervadha Buddhists strive to attain. In Mahayana Buddhism, sila is the guiding force of practicing compassion and generosity which they believe to be more important than achieving one’s own enlightenment (since it’s about the collective experience). In Tibetan Buddhism, through rituals and practices, one detaches from their ego as sila guides them to understand a greater sense of self that surrenders from external validation. Ultimately, though sila is understood and practiced differently based on each type of Buddhism’s emphasis of its ultimate goal, sila remains the guiding, foundational principle that defines how one can enhance their own Buddhist values.