



COMPASSION AND CONNECTION AS THE HEART OF MORAL LIFE: BRIDGING ETHICS OF CARE AND BUDDHIST ETHICAL THOUGHTS

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This paper examines how Buddhist ethics and the Ethics of Care share a common foundation in compassion, interdependence, relational responsiveness and attentiveness to human vulnerability at the center of moral life. Traditional Western ethical theories focus on rules, duties and principles, but both Buddhist ethics and care ethics emphasize the understanding of suffering, responsiveness with empathy, and valuing human relationships. Care ethicist Carol Gilligan defines emotional awareness and moral relational responsibility as the need of others instead of emphasizing moral rules strongly. This paper shows how Buddhist ethics such as compassion or *karuṇā*, interdependence or *prāṭiyasamutpāda* supports the central insight of care ethics, which is proposed by American psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan. This paper demonstrates that both Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care lead us that moral life is not just about rules or chasing results, it's all about compassion, attentiveness and caring for people in real life situations. By bringing these two traditions into conversation, the article proposes a relational ethic of compassion. Together, these two perspectives highlight that ethical life is not only about following the rules or any abstract principle but also recognizing our insight of humanity on the connection of social bonds that reduce suffering and holding meaningful connections. Drawing on early Buddhist texts, *Mahāyāna* ethical ideals, and the care ethics which is articulated by most remarkable ethicist and psychologist Carol Gilligan, tend to emphasis on interdependence, and their prioritization of care over moral abstraction.

Keywords: *Compassion, Empathy, Care, Interdependence, Relationality, Moral Responsibility*

Introduction

Moral philosophy investigated to clarify the principles that can guide human actions towards rightness or wrongness. An ethical action of the human conduct in moral philosophy discussed in a various way but the performance of the rule centered and consequential oriented ethical framework in modern moral philosophy has been questioned for the engagement of lived human experience, particularly those of vulnerability of human or care centric approaches. Although, traditional ethical theories have long been considered as the prominent framework for moral judgement and decision making in modern ethical philosophy, these theories failed to explain or connect the understanding of human experience of the ethical needs. In the realm of this vision, both Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care provide a best asserting on the very aspect of the relation that is based on compassion in moral life. The intention of these two respectable grounds viz. Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care consider compassion, ethical connection and mutual interdependence as the ground center of ethical life. Instead of fully observing the set of principles and abstract rules both they lead the vulnerabilities and sensational appearances of human experiences. Compassion (*karuṇā*), the one aspect of the exercise of morality and that emerged from the very touch of the realisation of sufferings and the existence of mutual or relational interdependence of human life. Another, ethics of care is considered through the core aspect of relationality, responsibility and empathy. Through this article, the comparative study of Buddhist ethics and care ethics has been considered, showing that compassion (*karuṇā*) is not only a sensational feeling of empathy rather it defines a realisation of ethical framework of human life and the authenticity of human existence. With these two combine approaches of Buddhist ethics and care ethics, this study may emerge the contemporary ethical thoughts more reflective and victorious.

The Moral Architecture of Buddhist Ethics

Compassion as Relational Sensitivity: The term compassion (*karuṇā*), in Buddhist Ethics, is not only a sense of emotion, empathic reaction or response on sufferings in human existence but also it is kind of ethical disposition which is associated on moral insight of the nature of reality. Compassion is the virtue that is of importance in all schools of Buddhism but it is particularly emphasized by the *Mahāyāna* tradition¹. Compassion has specially been asserted from recognizing as a universal

condition of suffering in the life of the all-sentient beings and from the realisation of interdependence (*pratīyasamutpāda*) in relational ground. Understanding suffering leads to moral awareness or moral sense within a person, since it naturally arises moral sensitivity of care to others or try to reduce sufferings and give birth to the aspect of compassion in all human beings to get rid all the existential sufferings. In many of the western traditions, there are some ethical theories that are connected about the distinct between emotions and ethical argumentation or following rules. On the other hand, in Buddhist moral philosophy, compassion is asserted as the ethical framework of the realisation of morality. In Buddhist sources of knowledge is normally paired with compassion (*karuṇā*) rather than friendship. However, it is friendship which provides the paradigm for interpersonal relationships in Buddhism. The reason why compassion is so prominent in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is that it is raised to the status of what might be termed a ‘metaphysical’ virtueⁱⁱ. Compassion leads a kind of moral insight that deals to the proper response of all the practitioners instead of considering abstract rules or any ethical principles in particular situation. In Buddhist ethics, many ethical paths which have been asserted by Buddha, that is type of voluntary action to eliminate sufferings, but they should not be reduced to any moral code or rules in a strict sense. Consequently, Buddhist ethics is merged as the sensational realist and relational based approach in a practical sense since it emphasized the ethical conclusion towards the reality of sufferings and contextual based on specific situation.

Most exclusively, Intention or (*cetanā*), that we have discussed below, is considered as inseparable in Buddhist ethics where mentioned it as the root path of karmic action. A moral action is ethically good if it is associated with the intervention of care that is free from greed (*lobha*), offense (*doṣa*) and attachment (*moha*). So, in this way, compassion leads to the motivations of doing ethical actions as well as the standard of ethical evaluation in the engagement of moral intention. Compassion is not only limited on the human relationship but also it extends towards all sentient existence. Compassion is exercised not only by intuition or any moral insight but it is a form of transformation of life, cultivated by practical situation of human beings. Lastly it has to be said that, compassion is asserted the central ground of Buddhist morality that constructs the moral awareness of ethical conducts.

Dependent Origination and Relational Moral Ontology: The central feature of the Buddhist ethics is the denial of static or independent soul. According to Buddhist moral philosophy, the concept of soul is an impermanence which is associated the combination of changing elements of mental and bodily aspects. There is not a moral agent who is separated from any isolated relationships but rather all beings are situated within a dynamic web of causal and relational interdependence. This insight is explained through the theory of *pratīyasamutpāda* or dependent origination, which states that all events and being arise depending on causal conditions. From the ethical perspective it means that no action is isolated ethically from sentient beings. Each intension (*cetanā*) participates in the web of the relational field of life and deeds which is linked with moral responsibilities, derives the relational status about the awareness of moral agents that is interconnected in ethical world. Moral responsibility is not based on self-selfishness rather it is based on the relational self in which sufferings and welfare both are interconnected. Mainly, we are all connected to one another. So, doing ethical action means to act with this awareness to examine how to properly refine one’s behaviour and improving how we behave to reduce suffering.

Intention or *cetanā* and the Internal Ground of Moral Responsibility: Moral Intention or volition is the mental factor that leads to a karmic action and take a vital role in Buddhist ethics as well. Most of the theories maintain some obligations by judging ethical actions on the basis on consequences, but in Buddhist ethics mainly consider the intention of the mental aspects that leads to the karmic actions mainly. The core branch of Buddhism, mainly *Mahāyāna* school maintained the view that intention is the central foundation of an action that indicates the aspect of mental condition which is associated to moral life. In Buddhist ethics, an action is considered good or bad based on its intention, mental state and volition. We can understand that whether the ethical valuation of an action can be built on moral intention that is free from greed (*lobha*), hatred (*doṣa*) and attachment or delusion (*moha*). This ethical aspects of intention transforms the moral insight of human from any kind of outward consequences of an action. So, the intention of morality becomes a continuous process of developing mental and physical phenomenon as well. This gravity of the moral aspects of intention which is associated with the spiritualization of Buddhist ethics. Moral virtue (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and knowledge (*prajñā*)- these three together develop moral progress. When a person is aware of their own intentions, they become moral sensitive to the relations of their own thoughts, words and actions and that helps to maintain ethical relationship and moral responsibility to connect each other. Beside the importance aspect of moral intention, according to Buddhist moral philosophy, that clearly specify the ethical conducts of human behavior that is related to the appearance of relationality. Moral intention not only emphasis of constructing on the ethical conduct of human behaviors rather highlights the qualitative standard of personal relationship. Now we shall analyze the moral architecture of the ethics of care which is mentioned below.

The Ethics of Care – A Relational Paradigm

Origin and critique of traditional ethics: Ethics of Care is the most significant and influential tradition which is considered from the essential aspect of the Feminist ethical thought in the end of 20th Century. Ethics of Care is mainly emerged to give a proper response to the Traditional ethical theories such as Kantian Deontology and Bentham’s theory Utilitarianism, based on rigid rules or abstract principles and good consequences. For a long time, western moral philosophy has imagined the moral person as free, self-sufficient and fully rational beings who makes a moral decision through impartial principles but the ethics of care challenged these views here. It shows that all the sentient beings of human existence and the essence of relational self are dependent to each other. It is not possible to understand morality by ignoring these human values of the reality. An American psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan spread the concept of the Ethics of Care foremost. In her book ‘In a Different Voice: A

psychological Theory and Women Development' (1982), Gilligan shows that theory of moral development which is proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg, specially recognizing the framework of abstract rules and moral argumentations, less considering the perspective of women's morality. In response, Carol Gilligan argued that the ethical norms are not merely emphasizing rights and the ethics of justice's, relating to the impartiality of moral standard rather it is all about care, mutual relation and moral responsibilities.

Ontology of Relational Self and The Moral Sensibility of Emotions: The most initial subscription of care ethics is the reconsideration of self. In traditional western ethical theories, individuals are regarded as atomic, self-ruled as a separated self but another care ethics calls it individual as relational self. Individuals are interdependent on each other's by birth such as the relationship of mother son, families, social customs and so on. At various stage of life, we became dependent on others through mental and physical illness. It is not all about any failure or powerlessness of individuals rather it is a universal or natural status of human existence. Therefore, if morality is to reflect the true reality of human beings, it must acknowledge the truth of interdependence and relationship that is why ethics of care develops the relational self in which all sentient beings are identified on the realm of care. In many western ethical theories, moral emotion has less considered than reason and the justification of logic but care ethics criticizes this view and show that moral sensibility of emotion is regarded as empathy, care and elements of ethical norms. The term empathy as highly mentioned by care ethics, is not only a sensational feeling of emotion rather it captures the experience of morality in all sentient beings. From these perspectives, morality is not all about applying the rules rather focus on hearing the voice of others in which Carol Gilligan contributed her worked named '*Different voice*'. The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. Its association with women is an empirical observation, and it is primarily through women's voices that I trace its development.ⁱⁱⁱ Gilligan mainly saying that the different voice is shaped by broader theme-like care, connection and ethical responsibility, not by biological sex or gender.

Care and Moral Responsibility: Care ethics is the most influential tradition of morality in which it emphasized mutual relationship, empathy and care specially. Ethics of care seems to considered that ethical life of humans are mostly engaged with more based on relation in reality. So, this is why to understand moral responsibility, there is necessary to consider mutual relationship, empathy and social context. An American psychologist and ethicist Carol Gilligan played a key role in developing this ethical perspective, showing her book '*In a Different Voice: A psychological Theory and Women Development*' (1982) that morality is not just a question of rules and justice but is considered relationship and care. For her, the ethical thinking of humane is to protect the relationship to understand others need and developing through responsible responses. The acceptance of vulnerability and dependency are the most essential ways of the ethics of care. Human life survives many situations where they become dependent on others- such as children, elderly, sick persons or socially vulnerable people. Care ethics sees this dependency as natural features of humane life. Therefore, moral responsibility is to be sensitive to this vulnerability and dependency and to respond it through care. The study of the care ethics mainly consider humans are essentially relational being, that is why humans are not understand as isolated and completely independent entities. Instead, they are deeply connected to family, society and various relationships. A person understands their moral duties, through care and empathy. For example, taking care of a sick family member is not just following the rules, it is a moral response that comes from the relationship, in this view, moral responsibility comes from love, compassion and closeness with others.

Empathic Intelligence in morality of the ethics of care: Empathic Intelligence is essentially considering empathy by understanding morality. In traditional ethics, morality is considered by abstract rules or universal principle as we earlier discussed but in the ground of the ethics of care shows that the ethical life of vulnerability of people is not only by universal rules or any principles but also impacted by care and the sensibility of emotions. So, in this realm, Empathic Intelligence is emphasized an essential element of morality. In the vision of morality, Empathic Intelligence is a mental ability through which a person can realize or perceive their own emotion and the emotions of others and respond ethically accordingly. An ethically matured persons is not only predicted through the set of rules rather they deeply analyze the ethical needs of others from the feelings of perceptions of vulnerabilities. they are motivated to work for the welfare of others. Empathetic Intelligence makes ethical relationship deeper and more stable, in family, friendship or social relationship, mutual understanding and caring between people are primarily developed through emotional bonding. Moral relationship is rigid or strong when a people respect to the feelings of others and the value their needs. This is why ethics of care considering the importance of empathetic intelligence for developing the morality of human life, it teaches a person to be compassionate towards others and makes him responsible and turn to the caring moral self.

Convergences between Buddhist Ethics and the Ethics of Care

Compassion as the source of ethical sensitivity: At the center of ethical life, compassion is the central aspect of both Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care. Both these traditions see morality is not only seen by rules, duties and consequences rather they emphasize as ethical sensitivity to respond toward others. From this ground, compassion works as a fundamental moral sensitivity that enables people to realize and respond to many. In Buddhist ethics, compassion or karuna is the one of the core elements of the ethical concept of *Brahmavihāras* the four Buddhist virtues that aim to develop for reducing all the sufferings of all sentient beings. Compassion figures as the second of the four Brahma-viharas or 'Divine Abiding'. These are states of mind cultivated especially through the practice of meditation. The four are loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*).^{iv} Compassion here is not only considered as empathy or care, but as a kind of ethical quality that leads to intention or *cetanā* for doing karmic actions. A person becomes morally active by experiencing the suffering of others, this realization of the aspect of compassion acts also a kind of deep and sensitive feelings in people which bears as the

foundation for moral behaviors. Similarly, compassion takes a vital role in the ethics of care. Morality is considered with in mutual relationship here and making people attentive to the needs of others. In care ethics, moral sensitivity means the position of the experience of other and respond in a careful manner. In this process, compassion makes people morally responsible. So, compassion is considered as the active ethical force in both these tradition of Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care. The aspect of compassion is not limited to empathy but also manifest itself through actions. In Buddhist ethics, compassion motivates action to alleviate or reduce suffering. In the ethics of care, compassion motivates people to act with care for the welfare of others. As a result, compassion acts as a bridge that brings connect between these two ethical traditions together. It helps people to go beyond themselves and connect with others. In this way, we understand that our actions affect other people. In Buddhism, everything is connected to each other. In care ethics, we see the idea of self as associated by relationships. In this way, compassion becomes the base of moral sensitivity, so people become more caring and responsible for others.

Intention and Responsiveness in Moral Agency: Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care, from both of these two perspectives, moral agency depends on the intention and the responsiveness of the people. These two elements express the inside of the ethical conduct and the dimension of socio relational context. Also in Buddhist ethics, intention or *cetanā* is discussed in the significant aspect of Buddhist ethics. According to this perspective, any action can lead to considered as good or bad which is guided by intention. If someone has aimed to do good for others so that can be ethically good such examples: help for others or to reduce sufferings, but the action is ethically wrong if the intention is considered as bad so the will of intention is morally essential. Another, in the perspective of the ethics of care, moral agency is discussed or explained in terms of responsiveness. So, in this context, a person is moral who response sensitively or attentively to perceive needs, experience and suffering towards others. Here the meaning of the ethical ground of responsiveness lead to explain as moral awareness and responsible ethical process that is constructed or build in the context of relationship. So finally, in both Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care, intention creates morality from inside of the moral agent; another in care ethics, morality is built through mutual relationship with the one to others.

Interdependence and Relational Self: Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care both these two perspectives maintained the existence of human that is not regarded as single and distinct individual rather it understands mutual dependency and relational approaches. In the perspective of Buddhist ethics, dependent origination or *pratītyasamutpāda* remarks that nothing exists alone or exist as independently, everything is considered as dependent on something else with the web of causal relationship that means a person's life, thought and behavior are all causally connected to the people, society and environment. For this reason, the self is not a fixed or separate truth or entity, but rather as a reality formed in relationship according to the Buddhist ethics. Thus, the concept of relational self is very important in the ethics of care. It is said that people are not considered only as interdependent individual but also, they build their identity through family, friendship and social relationships. In Buddhist ethics, people are considered to see others suffering as connected to their own, this means we should feel compassion and try to reduce others pain. Similarly, in the ethics of care, we focus on the needs of others because we all are connected through relationships. So, moral behavior is not just about personal benefit rather it goes beyond self-interest and intend to care for others.

Conclusion

This study explains a deep comparative and communicative analysis between Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care, analyzing that both these systems emphasize compassion, relationality and interdependence at the center of moral life while traditional ethics such as utilitarianism and deontological ethics primarily define morality in terms of rules, principle or consequences. Buddhist ethics and the ethics of care both these traditions establish the harsh realities of human experience specially sufferings, vulnerability and the need for care as the foundation of ethical life. In Buddhist ethics, compassion (*karuṇā*), dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and intention (*cetanā*) these ethical ideas that build as an integrated moral framework in which ethics is not only a matter of judging external action but is deeply connected with inner mental transformation and the realization of relational interconnectedness. The comparative analysis of both these two ethical traditions show that one is spiritual and focused on liberation while another developed from social and feminist context although their philosophical foundation is different but both these traditions move away or shift from abstract and impersonal moral systems or any rigid moral codes and rather maintains morality within real human relationship, empathy and the reality of mutual dependence. Buddhist ethics sees compassion as universal and for all beings, extending equal care to everyone. On the other hand, the ethics of care understands empathy which deeply associated with relational self that mainly exist within close and specific relationships, both traditions point towards relation and sensitive understanding of moral life.

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- ⁱ Keown, Damien. (2005). *Buddhist Ethics- A very short introduction*, Oxford university press, page 15
- ⁱⁱ Ibid. (1995). *Buddhism and Bioethics*. Macmillan Press, page 51
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. (2005). *Buddhist Ethics- A very short introduction*, Oxford university press, page 15
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. (1995). *Buddhism and Bioethics*. Macmillan Press, page 51
- ^{iv} Gilligan, Carol. (2003). *In a Different Voice psychological theory and women's Development*, Harvard University Press Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England. Page.2
- ^v Keown, Damien. (2005). *Buddhist Ethics- A very short introduction*, Oxford university press, page 15

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