



THE BROADER SENSE OF MOTIVATION IN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT :

Ancient philosophy has a lot to say about motivation, the space where ethics, psychology, and metaphysics converge. In the ancient thoughtful world, motivation was a core concern among Greek thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato as well as within the Indian tradition in texts like Upanishads, Chinese Confucianism and early Buddhist texts, all of which used motivation to form a basis for understanding human behavior and moral development. While these various schools of thought converge at the concept that motivation is a function of desires, reasoning, and morality, they contrastively disagree upon what that means, what the motivating forces should be and how they should interact.



KEYWORDS: Motivation, Greek philosophy, Chinese philosophy, Indian philosophy, Buddhist philosophy, Dependent Origination, Intrinsic and extrinsic Motivation.

1.0 Motivation in Greek Philosophy:

Motivation in Greek philosophy is a concept closely associated with the soul or psyche and the faculties of the soul. In *The Republic*, Plato explains the theory of the tripartite soul, the rational, spirited, and appetitive aspects of the soul. Plato's theory of motivation comes from his description of the nature and structure of the soul; the soul consists of three parts: the rational soul, which seeks truth and wisdom; the spirited soul, which seeks honour and the appetitive soul, which seeks physical desires. Plato argues that ethical motivation depends on the harmony of these parts, which is established through the governance of logos.

On the contrary, Aristotle emphasizes purpose and virtue as motivational diffusions. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states that every human action is directed towards some good and that happiness is the highest good. Motivation in Aristotle is intimately connected with the development of virtues that help align desires with rational designs. He writes, "The good is an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue."

1.1 Motivation in Ancient Chinese Philosophy:

In the ancient Chinese context, motivation is interconnected with the path of moral cultivation, cosmology and harmonious living according to universal principles. Confucius, Laozi, and Mencius offered complex understandings of what motivates human action, arguing for the effects of virtue, self-discipline, and spontaneity in leading a moral and meaningful life. From Confucius's perspective, motivation grows from the cultivation of moral virtues, particularly ren or benevolence and propriety. Therefore, he implied that society will be functional if individuals feel the need to behave in such a

manner by internalizing these virtues. In *the Analects*, Confucius states the noble person is motivated by virtue, while the petty person is motivated by profit.

In contrast, Laozi focused on the more natural and effortless motivation of aligning oneself with the Dao or The Way. He criticized strict ethical systems, which he thought of as rules to be broken, in favor of spontaneous and instinctual actions in the excellent order of the natural world. For example, Laozi says, "The sage acts by doing nothing and teaches without speaking. Things arise, and he lets them come; things disappear and he lets them go." Confucian thought was later expanded upon by Mencius, who claimed that people are born good and seek to feel compassion and righteousness within themselves. In Mencius, he states the heart of compassion is the beginning of benevolence, and the heart of shame is the beginning of righteousness. For Mencius, proper education and moral cultivation stir these inborn predispositions, directing human beings toward virtuous behavior.

1.2 Motivation in Indian Philosophy:

In contrast, Indian philosophical traditions, as seen in the *Upanishads*, Buddhism, and the *Bhagava Gita*, have also offered rich cultural perspectives on motivation that highlight the complexities of how desire, duty, and liberation influence our motivations. The Upanishadic teachings emphasize the spiritual aspect of motivation, particularly the quest for self-realization and unity with the ultimate reality. Temporal motivations based on worldly desire are seen as ephemeral, and spiritual knowledge is considered liberating. The *Katha Upanishad* says, "The wise, knowing the self as eternal, seek not the fleeting desires of the world."

By contrast, Buddhism focuses on mindfulness and ethical intention as the basis for motivation. From the *Dhammapada*, "All actions are preceded by intention; intention is their master." The analysis of motivation revolves around wholesome and unwholesome mental states, the ultimate goal of abandoning craving and attaining liberation. These are included within the broader perspective of the *Bhagavad Gita*, providing a basis of motivation through selfless action or *karma yoga*. But also, God *Krishna* instructed the king to act without attachment to the fruits of action, thus: "Perform your duty equipoised, O Arjuna, abandoning all attachment to success or failure."

1.3 Ancient and Modern Ideas on The Nature of Motivation:

Greek and Indian philosophies both emphasize a concern for the alignment of motivation with ethical and rational norms, although their specific approaches differ in significant ways. There is a type of Greek philosophy that focuses on the development of rational virtues and harmony within society, while in the Indian traditions, the primary interest is on transcending those desires out of ego and the attainment of spiritual liberation. But both traditions acknowledge the dangers of unrestrained ambition and emphasize the need to develop discipline and discernment.

More recently, Martha Nussbaum has argued in *The Fragility of Goodness* that ancient Greek thinking on motivation, especially Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* and its significance in dealing with the uncertainties of life, is strikingly relevant to modern conditions. Similarly, other scholars like Eknath Easwaran in his *Essence of the Bhagavad Gita*, emphasize the practical applicability of Indian mystical insights into selfless motivation for modern life.

Ancient philosophy, particularly regarding motivation, has thorny matters and a great deal for contemporary conversations about human behavior, ethics, and psychology. The call to bring desires in line with reason and ethics is echoed in modern psychological theories about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Self-determination theory developed by the psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, parallels some ancient ideas encapsulated, emphasizing motivation with autonomy and psychological correspondence between human activity and personal values.

In the contemporary landscape, ancient philosophical wisdom can guide education, leadership, and self-improvement. By focusing on the cultivation of virtue, mindfulness, and selflessness, ancient philosophies can offer timeless wisdom in cultivating motivation that transcends ego-driven goals and fosters individual and collective well-being.

1.4 Buddhism and Other Ancient Philosophical Thoughts on Motivation:

Echoing across these different philosophical traditions is the conception of motivation as a product of the interface between internal virtues and external balance, providing a timeless perspective on the dynamics of meaning, purpose, and human action. In Buddhism, the ethical transformation of intentions to eradicate defilements and attain liberation is essential, whereas the Greek, Chinese, and Indian philosophies discussed motivation in terms of virtue, harmony, and self-control.

In Buddhism, the focus is not on the outcome of one's actions but on the internal state that led to it by distinguishing wholesome mental states from unwholesome tendencies. The *Dhammapada* states that the mind leads all actions, and the mind is their chief. This is similar to traditions within India, as in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the idea of motivation is grounded in selfless action. It says, "Perform your duty without attachment to the results." According to Greek philosophy described by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, motivation is tied to entering eudaimonia or happiness, which is achieved through the development of arete or virtue. "The good for man is an activity of the soul in conformity with virtue."

Confucius, for example, emphasizes moral cultivation and societal harmony. He declares the noble person is based on virtue, and the petty person is based on profit. However, Laozi's Daoist view is for lazy motivation when all are in tune with the natural order of things: "The sage acts by doing nothing and teaches without speaking." While both Buddhism and Indian philosophies emphasize liberation from worldly attachments, Greek and Chinese traditions pay more attention to the maintenance of ethical harmony both within the individual and in society. All these approaches together point out that motivation is served by internal virtues and manifested externally in the form of actions.

2.0 Motivation and Dependent Origination:

Dependent Origination expresses the interdependent reality of phenomena in terms of how any experience arises from *padhāna* and *apadhāna paccaya* or approximate and unapproximate specific causes and conditions. This is how motivation works, as both the recipient and agent of conditioning. The twelve links of Dependent Origination show how craving, *tanhā*, and clinging, *upādāna* drive the cycle of rebirth, *saṃsāra*.

According to Bhikkhu Bodhi in *The Noble Eightfold Path*, this link of intention or *cetanā* in the chain of causation is key, as it motivates actions that evoke future conditions. The interdependence is usually illustrated as a chain of twelve links that keep the cycle of birth, suffering and rebirth alive. Craving and clinging are two of these links and are a primary force behind human behavior. Craving is the desire for sensation, existence, and non-existence. Clinging is the *kamma* that makes the unwholesome, habitually persistent. All of these forces combine to create motivations that form over a period of time into a pattern of unhealthy action, emotional pain, and ethical degradation.

Motivation, from Dependent Origination, is a conditioned event that emerges from the relationship between inner states and outer conditions, which generates the quality of the mental stream. For example, unwholesome volitions based on greed or *lobha*, hatred or *dosa*, and delusion or *moha* are caused by ignorance or *avijjā*, the first link in the chain. Ignorance hides the truth of reality and makes the collective volitional intentions do certain actions which cause the cyclic pattern of misery.

In contrast, all healthy motivations, based on compassion or *karunā*, generosity or *dāna*, and mindfulness of *sati* arise from wisdom or *paññā* and the understanding of ethics. Whether one inclines towards liberation or being caught in *saṃsāra* depends on the rise of wholesome or unwholesome motivations. Mindfulness and insight meditation seek to sever these links, transmuting ignorance-based motivations into wisdom. Moreover, the doctrine of Dependent Origination shows how environmental and social conditions influence motivation. Buddhism teaches that we need to create good conditions for our good *kamma* to flourish, like bringing good friends together or *kalyāna mittatā* and removing distractions and things that anchor us. This perspective enables that motivation is not only an inner event but also shaped and affected by outer conditions.

2.1 Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations in Modern Psychology:

Modern psychology introduced the terms intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as the orientation behind human behavior. Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal satisfaction or curiosity, whereas extrinsic motivation is motivated by social or financial pressures from the outside world. Such differences have deep ethical implications, especially when framed by the Buddhist idea of ethical alignment and mindfulness, which help us cultivate wholesome motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is the drive to do something for its own sake rather than as a means to an end. These are examples of pursuing a hobby for pleasure, solving a problem out of curiosity, developing a skill for personal development, etc. Over the years, psychological studies have shown that intrinsic motivation to create leading to greater creativity, persistence, and even greater overall well-being. Buddhism heavily emphasizes intrinsic motivation, especially when it is in accord with *dhamma*, purity, and spiritual aspiration. For example, the aspiration to develop mindfulness or compassion reveals innate motivations that enhance individual transformation and shared welfare. The impetus for such motivations lies in the desire to minimize suffering and promote moral behavior, which as a Buddhist notion, links with *cetanā* or intention as a compass of ethical actions.

Buddhist ethics and intrinsic motivations go beyond self-interest, acknowledging the interconnectedness of all beings and the responsibility that entails for the welfare of others. This is ethically better than extrinsic motivation because it represents a greater likelihood of mindfulness and, hence the most possible number of wholesome actions through systematic self-awareness. Extrinsic motivation is prompted by external factors like monetary incentives, social praise, or avoidance of punishment. Although an external system of incentives may lead to positive behavior, it often has the potential to breed attachment, dissatisfaction, and unwholesome conduct.

In the right context, extrinsic motivation can bring about positive outcomes. Such as acknowledgement for charitable contributions may motivate people to repeat their actions that it could indirectly create a culture of philanthropy. Attachment to external rewards continues the cycle of craving and impermanent external rewards often lead to dissatisfaction and unwholesome action. We are inspired by elements outside of ourselves. If we have no substance, our behavior will become shallow.

Extrinsic motivation is a part of everyone, but becoming too reliant on it diminishes intrinsic motivation and a loss of autonomy and self-awareness. Buddhism criticizes extrinsic motivation because of its propensity to sustain the cycle of craving and clinging. Pursuing personal gain, like wealth or status, by all means, can become a source of suffering and moral decline. The Buddha taught that we should not get attached to the external material rewards, achievements and success that come under the nature of impermanence.

The ethical differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are considerable in psychological and Buddhist contexts. Self-awareness, intentionality and wholesome actions are foods for ethical intrinsic motivations. A compassionate drive of a true desire to help results in behaviors that are good for the self and others. Such motives encourage emotional resilience, ethical clarity, and spiritual growth.

Those who neglect to nurture their intrinsic motives and instead become overindulgent in extrinsic motives will form unwholesome behaviors, which implicate greed, deception, exploitation, and other outward ethical considerations as external rewards gain priority. Such motivation clouds moral instruction, leading to a breakdown of personal well-being and social order. Recognizing that extrinsic motivations can gradually evolve into intrinsic ones is especially important in the context of Buddhist practices. A person who starts donating to charity because they want social approval could discover a deeper, more intrinsic, and compassionate motivation through a practice of mindfulness.

Both Buddhism and modern psychology emphasize cultivating intrinsic motivators as a means towards increased well-being and moral alignment. Buddhist practices offer concrete tools for this process. Mindfulness allows practitioners to witness their motivations non-judgmentally so that they might recognize and change from extrinsic to intrinsic motivators.

On the other hand, mindfulness meditation may expose the discontent that accompanies external pursuits, prompting a connection to internal values. It raises awareness of the ethical

implications of certain behaviors which encourages students to self-correct. Knowing that external rewards are transitory encourages someone to develop virtues like compassion and generosity. By cultivating generosity, the world transitions from the mentality of taking to that of sharing. It shifts any extrinsically conditioned behavior into intrinsically oriented intentions grounded in virtue.

In the *Intrinsic Versus Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions Contemporary Educational Psychology*, Richard and Edward point out that "Intrinsic motivation enhances well-being by aligning actions with personal values and authentic interests." This perspective accords with Buddhist lessons that emphasize intrinsic motivations as the basis for a proper and emancipatory life. The distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, relayed to us by modern psychology, is profoundly helpful for understanding human behavior with important ethical ramifications. The intrinsic motivations which are concordant with values of right action and natural virtue generates authenticity, mindfulness and wholesome action, whilst excessiveness of extrinsic motivations can reinforce the habits of craving, aversion and dissatisfaction.

CONCLUSION

According to Buddhist philosophy, the mind is a dynamic and conditioned process that reflects one's intentions and mental processes rather than a set substance. This process is driven by motivation, which establishes whether the mind leans toward mental culture or barbarism with natural impulses. Motivating people with mindfulness, wisdom and compassion can help turning their minds into tools for achieving happiness or freedom from suffering. Mind and motivation factors are interdependent, emphasizing how crucial it is to develop right thought as a component of the Noble Eightfold Path. According to Buddhist philosophy, motivation is a fundamental component of moral and spiritual growth since it highlights the ways in which it affects both individual ethical behavior and the stability of social order peacefully and the general welfare of society.

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