Buddhist Moral Psychology: An Inquiry into the Buddhist View of Moral Judgment

Ven. Kumbukandana Rewatha Thero,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Kelaniya, Kelaniya, Sri Lanka,
krewatha@yahoo.com, krewatha@kln.ac.lk,
nugasewana@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the Buddhist psychological explanation on moral judgment, referring to Buddhist Theravada Sutta Pitaka and secondary sources. The Buddhism (Buddhist Psychology/Psychological Buddhism) is a moral practice leading to the perfected morality and in this regard, it has subsequently utilized certain specific terms as well as the criteria to judge the moral and immoral acts. According to Buddhist psychology, the performer determines whether his or her actions are moral or immoral, depending on the consequences of actions on the performer and others. Buddhism has recommended procedures for purifying actions and consequently, anybody can change his or her immoral actions into moral ones by following certain procedures. Buddhism contemplates only volitional acts as actions, which are performed using body, speech and mind. The responsibility of the actions subsists on the performer, and the Buddhist psychology of moral judgment does not consist of any commandments that govern performing acts, but rather the performer settles upon whether an action is performed or not. Similarly, Buddhist psychology of morality varies from certain other subjects, as they employ physical rewards and punishment to develop or decrease necessary or unnecessary actions

Key Words: Morality, immorality, Buddhist Moral Psychology, Buddhist View, Eight Fold Path, Virtue, action

Introduction

Moral Psychology deals with human behavior and thought in moral contexts, and aims at understanding how people's sense of morals develops. Historically, it has been used to refer to the study of moral development. However moral psychologists are interested in many individual topics related to moral life, moral iudgment. moral reasoning. moral identity. responsibility. moral character. moral development and the like. Haidth and Kesebir (2010) regard morality to be the right and wrong way to behave¹. Moral judgment, i.e. the judgment of moral quality of actions, refers to the determination a man makes as to whether an action is right or wrong, in relation to the standards of rightness. Considering one's social norms and values, actions are evaluated, referring to the quality of those actions. In these evaluations, people refer to their internal representations of those norms and values. Certain psychologists emphasize the role of conscious and rational reasoning processes (Kohlberg, 1969), while some others value the role of unconscious and intuitive processes in moral judgment (Haidth, 2007)². In spite of those different views in psychology, this paper aims at examining the Buddhist perspective on moral judgment.

Buddhism includes moral concepts and theories, which collectively line up devotees for the only way of living led by the perfected morality, Nibbana, the ultimate state of human moral development, for which all Buddhist moral principles, procedures and teachings guide. Almost all the Buddhist teachings address human morality, while directing people to purify their actions to the fullest for the attainment of its ultimate goal, Nibbāna. *Dhammapada* proclaims the Buddhist moral view in a nutshell in a stanza that states one should purify his/her mind so that not any wrong action be done; good qualities should be cultivated (Dhp, 183). Buddhism admires moral conduct (*dhamma cariya*) while refusing and

condemning immoral conduct (adhamma cariva). Buddhist moral view never employs commandments, physical rewards or physical punishments to encourage or discourage any right or wrong actions. It does not assign prohibitions, and instead, confirms the freewill of the individual to choice actions. The individual can perform either right or wrong actions, and Buddhism explains the consequences of one's actions. An individual may perform actions, with reasoned judgments. The enlightened ones (Tatāgatās) only show the way. People themselves should do what ought to be done³. The consequences of all right and wrong actions befall on the performer. The decision for performing such actions is also made not by any god but by the doer himself or herself. Any person may perform either moral or immoral actions, subject to the fact that the consequences of actions will follow. Buddhism believes that what is cultivated will be reaped. Conversely, the Buddhist view of morality should be understood in its own terms, which are unique to Buddhism. Buddhist Psychology is full of standards and criterions for moral judgment. Accordingly, this study aims at exploring the Buddhist view of moral judgment, and the related teachings on morality.

Objectives

The objectives of this study include;

- 1. To understand the Buddhist psychological foundation of moral judgment.
- 2. To examine the criteria in Buddhism for moral and immoral acts and their components.
- 3. To understand the principles of Buddhist Psychology of moral judgment.

Methodology

The current study which aims at investigating the Buddhist view of moral judgment was conducted with reference to the *Tripitaka* literature of *Thēravāda* Buddhism. As the methodology, a Qualitative research approach was administered and in terms of data collection, the suitable data and documents were utilized as the main data sources. Accordingly, the *SuttaPitaka* of three volumes of *Thēravāda* Buddhism, published by Dharma Chakkra Child Foundation, *Bandāragama*, Sri Lanka in 2006 was referred to as the primary source. In addition to primary sources, relevant secondary sources were also referred to in the study, and Buddhist teachings of moral judgment have been qualitatively and descriptively analyzed under themes.

Buddhist Terminology of Morality and Immorality

The ultimate aspiration of Buddhism is to attain Nibbāna, the perfected morality and therefore, the discourse on morality in human lives is not alien to Buddhism, which has used several terms (pairs of evaluative terms) to imply moral and immoral actions. Out of them, punna (meritorious), kusala (skillful), sukkha (bright), dhamma (righteous), sēvatabba (actions to be cultivated), and kalyāna (good) all constitute moral actions. As opposed to these terms, pāpa (demeritorious), akusala (unskillful), kanha (dark), adhamma (unrightious), asēvitabba (things not to be done) and pāpaka (evil) are the terms that refer to immoral actions in Buddhism.

The Roots of Moral and Immoral Actions

Buddhism elaborates the roots of both moral and immoral actions that are deliberate. Consequently, the Kusalākusala Mula Sutta states non-greed $(al\bar{o}bha)$, non-hatred $(ad\bar{o}sa)$ and non-delusion $(am\bar{o}ha)$ as the roots of moral actions, and conversely, greed $(l\bar{o}ba)$, aversion $(d\bar{o}sa)$, delusion $(m\bar{o}ha)$ as the roots of immoral actions. Moreover, the Mahali Sutta in Anguttara Nikaya also put forwards two other roots of

both moral and immoral actions; i.e. the appropriate attention rightly directed (vōnisōmanisikāra) and (sammāpanihitan cittan) as the roots of moral actions and, in contrast, the inappropriate attention (avōnisōmanasikāra) and the wrongly directed mind (*miccāpanihitan cittan*) as the roots of immoral actions.⁵ In addition to this explanation, several discourses (Suttas) stress on the fact that not knowing the Four Noble Truths (catu ariva saccha) to be the root of ten immoral actions, including taking others' lives, steeling, sexual misconduct, lying, slandering, harsh speech, and frivolous talk⁶. In this regard, Sigalovada Sutta also provides with four causes of immoral actions, i.e. desire (chanda), anger (dosa), fear (bhavā), and ignorance (mōhā).

Buddhist Criteria of Morality

It is much fundamental to differentiate right and wrong actions. The Buddhist psychology provides very clear criteria of moral judgment, which people can apply in deciding whether their actions are right or wrong. Thereby, Buddhist psychology increases the moral consciousness of humans upon their conduct. Moral judgment is considered the main cognitive factor of moral consciousness. It involves the comparison of actions with moral standards. Volition (Cetana), which is considered to be action, can be utilized as a criterion for the judgment of actions. Thus, based on volition, one can judge whether actions are right or wrong. A surgery may cause pain to the patient. However, as the doctor's volition is to cure (a good volition), this is certainly a right action. In addition to volition, if an action is directed towards attainment of Nibbana, it is regarded as a right action. Every right action is helpful to attain the Nibbana, while wrong actions barricade the path. Moreover, every right action is beneficial for the performer and the society. Thus, one can judge whether his/her action is helpful to attain Nibbana or not and think whether it is right or wrong.

Buddhism evaluates an action as either right or wrong depending on the consequences of an action. The Buddhist judgment incorporates judgments of the total consequences of actions for self and others. The Buddhist consequentialist approach to morality provides clear grounds for people to judge the morality of human behavior. On the consequences of the act, both one's own actions and the actions of others can be determined to as either morally acceptable or unacceptable. An individual can base his/her judgment on decisions as to whether his/her actions violate or promote these criterions. Moral judgment arises from one's self evaluations of consequences. Thus, according to Buddhist psychology, the judgment in terms of morally acceptable and unacceptable actions is not merely an automatic but a conscious process. Consequently, no individual can avert the consequences of moral responsibility. As a mirror is for reflection, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done subject to reaction.8 In reflecting so, if the performer is aware of the fact that that an action is beneficial for him and others, that action is undoubtedly a right one. Taking the affliction into account, the actions should be reflected at three instances.

- 1. Before a bodily action, a verbal action, & a mental action is done.
- 2. While a bodily action, a verbal action, & a mental action is being done.
- 3. After a bodily action, a verbal action, & a mental action is done.

The Ambalattikarāhulōvāda Sutta of Majjima Nikāya guides as to how to reflect one's actions. Buddha proclaimed

that 'whenever you want to perform a bodily action, you should reflect on it: would this bodily action that I want to do lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Would it be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences? On reflection, if you are aware of the fact that it would lead to selfaffliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences. Then any bodily action of this nature is absolutely unfit for you to do. However, on reflection, if you know that it would not cause affliction, it would be a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences, any bodily action of this nature is fit for you to do. While doing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: is this bodily action I am doing leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences? On reflection, if you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both. you should give it up. However, on reflection, if you know that it is not leading to affliction of both, you may continue with it. The reflection of actions does not end up and it continues even after an action has been done. Buddha taught that having done a bodily action too, you should reflect on it: did this bodily action I have done lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Was it an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences? On reflection, if you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences. Then you should confess it, reveal it, and lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the spiritual life. Having confessed it, you should exercise restraint in the future. However on reflection, if you understand that it did not lead to affliction. It has been a skillful bodily action with pleasant consequences. You should stay mentally refreshed and joyful training day and night in skillful mental qualities.9

Verbal actions and mental actions should also be reflected in the same manner; if those actions do not lead to affliction of the doer and others, and if the consequences of those actions are good for performers as well as others, they are skillful, right and moral, and Lord Buddha has taught to do such actions. The responsibility of reflection and the judgment as to whether an action is right or wrong depends on the performer. Buddha advised people to train themselves and to purify their bodily actions, verbal actions and mental actions through repeated reflections.

Another very important criterion in relation to moral and immoral actions is recorded in Kālāma Sutta in Anguttara Nikāya. Lord Buddha guided Kālāmas not to go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought that this contemplative is our teacher. When you know yourselves that these qualities are unskillful, these qualities are blameworthy, these qualities are criticized by the wise, these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to harm and to suffering, then you should get rid of them¹⁰. On one's self understanding, the immoral action is judged.

If an action leads to welfare and happiness, it is thought to be moral. In the Kālāma Sutta, Buddha has stated not to go by reports, by legends, by traditions etc. When you know yourselves that these qualities are skillful, these qualities are blameless, these qualities are praised by the wise, these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness, then you should observe and maintain in them. The Sutta advises neither to reject nor to accept anything relying on anything, and instead, Buddha valued one's own knowledge. If one knows that certain things are unwholesome (*akusala*), they should be given up. When one knows that certain things are

good and wholesome, and then they should be accepted and followed.¹¹

In addition to the above criteria in Buddhism, another criterion of identifying morality is included in Adhipateyya Sutta in Anguttara Nikāya, which emphasizes three governing principles (*adhipateyya*) to be considered in performing an action.¹²

1. The self (Conscientiousness).

Taking one's Conscientiousness as his own governing principle, the person abandons unskillful actions, develops skillful actions, abandons blameworthy actions, develops unblameworthy actions, and looks after himself in a pure way. The person considers himself as the criterion for the judgment of actions. If she/he is reluctant to lie to others, others should also be the same. In this manner, one can think of behaviors of oneself.

2. The cosmos (Public opinion).

The individual can examine his actions considering what the wise people in the society would say about those actions. Thus, taking the social approval into account, skillful and unblameworthy actions can be developed and unskillful and blameworthy ones can be abandoned.

3. The Dhamma.

An individual should examine whether his actions are in accordance with Buddha's doctrines. Taking into Lord Buddha's views and teachings with regard to what he is about to perform, he can judge his actions and avoid all actions that deviate from it

According to Buddhist criterion of morality, a performer decides whether his actions are moral or immoral by reflecting his conscientiousness, societal decisions and the Dhamma (Lord Buddha's doctrine). It is not merely dependent on any commandments or words by any god. The internal mental state and the concern for the consequences of actions are vital to determine the overall goodness of actions.

Buddhist Moral Principles

Moral principles indicate the good, virtues, right or ethical ways for humans to behave (Haidth, 2012), and they regulate and govern human conduct. In a sense, they provide with behavioral guidelines and procedures to humans in order to display moral behaviors. Such principles refer to the implications of judgments about right and wrong; what everyone should and should not do. Buddhist psychology is explicit in terms of principles on moral behavior. Lord Buddha had articulated moral principles which include virtue (Sila), Eightfold Path, actions (Kamma), and so on. Utilizing these principles, an individual can determine his/her actions to be moral or immoral. Based on such principles, Buddha has apparently showed moral and immoral acts separately. The principles, proclaimed by Buddha are elaborated as follows.

Precepts as a moral principle

The concern for virtue (*sila*) cultivation is certainly prevalent in Buddhist psychology. Starting from the five precepts, Buddhism teaches several codes of moral practices, such as eight precepts and ten precepts, which devotees observe and practice as higher moral conducts (eight precepts and ten precepts), mainly on Poya days. Five precepts are the very basic moral code and they are commonly followed by every Buddhist (*Upāsaka* and *Upāsikā*). Buddha emphasized these five moral actions (five precepts) against five immoral actions. Buddhism has advised to refrain from violating these five precepts, and to develop them in daily lives. In *Vyaggapajja Sutta*, Buddha

instructed on layman's rules of conduct and articulated these five precepts as laymen's duties, which are listed down as follows.

- 1. to refrain from taking life, i.e. killing any living creature
- 2. to refrain from taking what is not freely given, i.e. theft
- 3. to refrain from misuse of the senses or sexual misconduct, i.e. overindulgence in sex or committing sexual offences
- 4. to refrain from wrong speech, i.e. lying or gossiping
- 5. to refrain from intoxicants that cloud the mind, i.e. drugs or alcohol¹³

These precepts that encourage right actions and accepted by Buddhism are the suggested ways of living. Anyone can decide whether his actions are right or wrong, based on these precepts or Sila. Because precepts are consciously observed by the followers, the responsibility of one's actions lies within the performer. In addition to five immoral actions. Buddhism elaborates ten immoral actions (dasa akusal). Those are killing (Pānātipātā), taking what is not given (Adinnādānā), sexual misconduct (kāmēsu micchācārā), Lying (Musāvāda), slandering (Pisunāvācā), harsh speech (Parusāvācā), frivolous talk (Sampappalāpā), covetousness; greed for other's belongings (Abhijiā), ill-will, hatred (Vyāpāda), and wrong views (Micchā Ditthi).14 First three of these acts are performed using the body, the next four, through speech, and the last three acts, with mind. Refraining from five and ten immoral actions is regarded as virtue, a moral in Vyaggapajja sutta¹⁵. Through this practice, performer can purify his or her actions and be a moral character.

Buddhism teaches when wrong bodily conduct, wrong verbal conduct and wrong mental conduct are unskillful, wrong

and harmful, it should be blameworthy. If a particular bodily conduct harms the person and others, it should be blameworthy. Accordingly, Buddha's recommendation was to refrain from blameworthy bodily, verbal and mental conducts and to follow any conduct which is not harmful to the relevant person and others¹⁶. Vajja Sutta elaborates on two types of crimes people commit; the crimes for which retribution comes before one's death (dittadhammika vaija) and the crimes for which retribution comes after one's death (samparāvika vajja)¹⁷. Regardless of whenever the consequences are received, the individual should always avoid both of these types of crimes. One should live seeing a source of fear even in regard to the slightest crimes¹⁸. Depending on actions by people, Buddha has categorized four kinds of persons, i.e. the blameworthy, the very blameworthy, the slightly blameworthy, and the blameless¹⁹. Changing one's actions from blameworthy to blameless, one can become a person with a moral character.

The Noble Eightfold Path as a moral principle

Out of the Noble Eightfold Path, another Buddhist moral principle, three of them, namely, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood concern the development of moral conduct. Right speech consists of morally accepted verbal behaviors, including abstinence from lying, deception, slander, harsh words and idle chatter. Buddha advocated only speaking trustworthy words. Right Action entails refraining from three immoral actions done with body, the first three of the five precepts which are to refrain from taking others' lives, stealing and sexual misconduct. The right livelihood (Sammā Ajīwa) is to avoid business of weapons, human beings, meat, intoxicants and poison²⁰. Buddha denied these four occupations as they are harmful to living beings. These are immoral actions and therefore one should engage in morally-accepted occupations for living. In explicating the accomplishment of persistent effort (utthāna-Sampadā), Vyaggapajja Sutta recommends a householder's earning by farming, by trading, by rearing cattle, by archery, by service under the king, or by any other kind of craft for living. Again, the Sutta expounds that earnings should be made by dint of effort, collected by strength of arm, by the sweat of his brow, justly acquired by right means²¹.

However the Buddhist moral principles cannot be narrowed to right action (abstaining from killing, stealing, lying), right speech, and right livelihood. Besides bodily and verbal actions, the Buddhist psychology puts forth a variety of mental actions which are specific to its moral view, and they include covetousness; greed for other's belongings (Abhijjā), ill-will, hatred (Vyāpāda), and wrong views (Micchā Diṭṭhi)²². Seemingly, they appear as thoughts, motivations, and emotions in nature. In fact, it is the morality of mental actions that constitutes the main concern of the Buddha's teaching; right view, right intentions, rights effort, right concentration, and right mindfulness of Eight Fold path relate to different types of mental actions.

The Buddhist morality is gradualist and there are diverse ways of practicing the path with several degrees of commitment; all disciples are not expected to exercise Buddhist morality with the same intensity. Monks and nuns observe more precepts and devote more time to spiritual exercises than lay people. The ten bright or wholesome actions: three bodily actions (abstaining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct), four verbal actions (abstaining from false, divisive, harsh, and useless speech), and tree mental actions (abstaining from covetousness, ill-will, and dogmatic views) are common to all ordained and lay people.

Sigalōvāda Sutta puts forth fourteen evil ways that a householder should avoid²³. In the Sutta, Lord Buddha has enumerated the first four of the five precepts to be avoided by people. Buddha mentions six ways of squandering wealth, and

all of them should be avoided; indulging in intoxicants, wandering the streets at inappropriate times, frequenting public spectacle, compulsive gambling, malevolent companionship and habitual idleness. In the Sutta, duties, good actions that everyone in human society is required to fulfill for others are stated. The Sutta further elaborates the significance of friendship for attaining a blissful life and for that purpose; one should be a true friend and should find a true friendship.

Right determination (samma vavama), the sixth path, is of importance in realm of moral development which focuses on cultivating good, right, skillful actions and preventing bad. wrong and unskillful actions. It is mentioned that one should make attempts to upgrade the skillful actions arisen, to raise the skillful actions un-arisen, to remove unskillful actions arisen and not to produce unskillful actions un-arisen. It further emphasizes that one should determine not to take up negative qualities, to remove negative qualities from mind, to originate positive qualities still un-arisen and to upgrade and protect pleasant and supreme qualities in the mind. Thus, the right determination, as stated in Buddhism, directly contributes for the development of morality. Right concentration accounts for the judgment and development of moral actions. The eight fold Path, the path for the Nibbana purifies human actions. Thus, it is certain that the ultimate goal in Buddhism is achieved through the purification of actions and the eight fold path is presented as the path for that purification.

The law of Kamma as a moral principle

According to Buddhism the fundamental moral law of the universe is the law of kamma (Actions). Lord Buddha defines action in terms of intention or choice (cētanā) ²⁴. It is intention, according to Lord Buddha, that constitutes action. Having intended, someone acts using the body, speech, and mind. (A.III.415). Buddha divided actions into several

categories; skillful actions with skillful consequences, unskillful actions with unskillful consequences, unskillful and skillful actions with unskillful and skillful consequences and the like²⁵. Skillful actions produce good consequences while unskillful actions lead to bad consequences. Buddha's advice is to develop skillful actions and to avoid from unskillful actions. The consequences of volitional actions can be experienced in this life, next birth or in any birth within the existence of the life circle. It is believed that physical appearance, character, lifespan, prosperity, and rebirth destination are influenced by past actions²⁶. Nevertheless, one can eradicate the negative consequences of past actions with new volitions. All the time, the possibility of remaking this predicament is assumed.

The Dhammapada mentions all are afraid of punishments. Then, taking oneself as an example, one should not harm and assassinate others (Dhp, 129).²⁷. Kindness should be spread out to all living beings. It further states that the immoral action will defile while moral action will purify the performer. By oneself indeed is evil done and by oneself is one defiled; by oneself is evil not done and by oneself is one purified. Purity and impurity depend entirely on oneself; no one can purify another (Dhp, 165)²⁸. According to Buddhism, immoral acts are easy to be conducted, and it is indeed most difficult to conduct moral acts (Dhp, 163).²⁹ Buddhism instructs that one should first establish oneself in what is proper; then only one should teach others (Dhp, 158).³⁰ In taking the above Buddhist discourse into account, it is obvious that Buddhist psychology, at every instance of its doctrines, teaches people to be moral in characters, to purify their actions, to develop morality and to attain its ultimate goal.

It is understood that some factors are required for Buddhist moral view to be meaningful. Accordingly, the freewill of the individual to choose actions should be emphasized. Buddhism in every sense thinks that the individual has the capacity to initiate, continue and stop actions. Because of the individual's freewill, the Buddhism puts moral responsibility upon the individual. If only the individual is granted good results or advantages by performing right actions, it is useful to judge actions and perform only right actions. Buddhism emphasizes that performing right acts have good and skillful consequences. As life continues with no ends until the attainment of Nibbana, the consequences of right actions remain until the existence of the life circle. In addition to the above factors, performing right actions should be preceded by goal, and such right actions should be related with to that particular goal. In this sense, The Buddhism considers the path for the Nibbana, its ultimate goal as the Eight Fold Path which is a set of bodily, verbal and mental moral actions. Wrong actions obstruct the path to the ultimate purification, Nibbana. Therefore, one is required to refrain from wrong actions, and Buddhism teaches that wrongness should be defeated by rightness. In nature, man is good, and it is defilements that worsen his/her mind³¹. Lord Buddha has always addressed any good or bad individual with the word, 'meritorious man' (pinwatha) because of his/her capacities to be a right one.

Conclusion

This paper examined the idea of moral judgment in a Buddhist point of view, referring to the *Sutta Pitaka* of Three volumes of Theravada Buddhism. The Buddhism recommends to engage in moral actions and thereby to attain the perfected morality. Numerous terms that refer to moral and immoral acts are available, while many criteria, some of which are not covered in this article, have been prescribed by the Lord Buddha to judge such actions either as moral or immoral. In addition to bodily and verbal actions, mental actions and thoughts are particular to Buddhism. In order to facilitate a better understanding of the Buddhist moral view, it is important

that the particular terms are properly identified. Buddhism directs only to the extent that what is moral and what is immoral, teaching the consequences of those actions, with no commandments, orders, rewards or punishments.

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Abbreviations

A.N. = Anguttara Nikāya

D.N. = Diga Nikāya

M.N. = Majjima Nikāya

S.N. = Sanyukta Nikāya

Endnotes

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- 4. A.N., I, Kusalākusalamula Sutta, p.158,162
- 5. A.N., III, Mahāli Sutta, p.154
- 6. S.N., Pānātipāta Sutta, p.338
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- 8. M.N. II, Ambalatthika Rāhulōvāda sutta, p.132
- 9. Ibid, p.138
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- 13. A.N., V, Vyagghapajja Sutta, p.240
- 14. M.N., II, Mahāvacchagotta Sutta, p.266
- 15. A.N., V, Vyagghapajja Sutta, p.236
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- 19. A.N., Vajjapugga Sutta,p.262
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- 24. A.N. VI, Nibbedhika Sutta, p.208
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- 30. Siri Gnānōbhāsatissa, Moragolle, *Dhammapada Vivarana*, p.325
- 31. AN,I, Pathama Sutta, p.20