

A Brief Discussion on the Root of Morality Based on *The Agama Sutras*

—And Brief Comment on Shi Zhaohui's *Buddhist Metaethics*

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Abstract

Since ancient Greece, Western philosophers have tried to define the moral terms such as good, justice, etc. and endeavored to explore why human beings have the concept of morality and what is the root of morality. With such efforts until recent development of analytic philosophy, which uses the skill of linguistic analysis, ethics also re-explores the related propositions and ascribes all philosophic questions to the linguistic one so as to start the development of metaethics and make it become the focus of research. But after the research for nearly a century, not any breakthrough result for the proposition about the root of morality has been achieved yet.

From the viewpoint of Buddhist *Agama Sutras*, this article tries to study the aforementioned important propositions, which have been discussed for more than two thousand years in Western philosophy. We found that a firm and stable value system is used in Buddhism as the base of exploration; this system is the ten dharma-realms (ten *dharmadhatus*), which conform to the fact of dharma-realm. The six ordinary karma paths of the ten dharma-realms are the choice of karma paths faced by all sentient beings; the four noble dharma paths are the choice of dharma paths faced by those who dislike the transmigration (*samsara*) of karma paths. The value system of ten dharma-realms is built from the capability to practice morality, and the root of all moral values is precisely the embryo-entering consciousness, Tathagatagarbha, which can be actually realized.

Due to the objective existence of the ten dharma-realms, sentient beings, after the countless lives and deaths and with the hope of having better future rebirths or liberating themselves from transmigration, bring forth the moral concept as the choice of either karma paths or dharma paths. They use the moral concept as the boundary between good and evil, and as the definition of relative good and absolute good. Buddhist learners use the wisdom of true reality obtained from realizing the root of dharma-realm, Tathagatagarbha, to bring forth the wisdom of free will to choose and advance toward Buddhahood.

Shi Zhaohui thinks self-affection in dependent-arising dharma of Buddhism is used as the root

of morality to generate the method of self-mastery as the base of moral judgment. This article finds that “self-affection is not the root of morality, but is the cause of countless evils instead” in *The Agama Sutras*. Learning the method of self-mastery rather than the Buddha dharma is only to master the human or heavenly methods of worldly good; it only is the motivation of primary morality but not the root, and can only enable one to obtain good reward in future lives rather than to liberate oneself from transmigration. Therefore, the dependent-arising dharma is not the root of morality, but the Tathagatagarbha that dwells in and sustains each sentient being’s body and mind is the root of morality instead.

The three moral postulates of rational religions claimed by Kant are not correct. Among them, the postulates about the choice by free will and the existence of God contradict each other. This article thinks the real rational religions should have three contents of realization: 1. the existence of free will, 2. the permanent existence of Tathagatagarbha, and 3. the wisdom of true reality. In addition, the method of linguistic research is not a correct and efficient one for the proposition of being; all evidence obtained by linguistic research is not first-hand and only the wisdom obtained by personal direct realization is the real first-hand and ultimate one.

This article thinks the aspiration that hides deep inside all sentient beings’ hearts for the universal value of freedom, democracy, human right, etc. is exactly the aspiration for the wisdom of free will to choose in Buddhism. Due to the aspiration for universal value, all sentient beings, when they obtain a human body with the capability to practice morality, will personally realize the wisdom of true reality and advance, step by step, toward Buddhahood under the non-arrogant and compassionate teaching of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. But those who have decided to stay in Hinayana dharma are excluded.

Keywords: theory of value, theory of obligation, method of self-mastery, principle of efficiency, theory of intuition, theory of emotion, absolute freedom, universal value, moral philosophy, ethics, metaethics