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Abstract and Keywords

In what is remembered in Buddhist traditions as the first discourse of the Buddha, the Buddha outlined Four Noble Truths that framed the basic doctrine of the early Buddhist tradition and the Theravāda tradition today. The four truths specify that, firstly, existence is characterized by “unsatisfactoriness” or suffering, literally a lack of ease; secondly, suffering has a cause, identified as aversion, craving, and ignorance; and thirdly, because suffering has a cause it can also come to an end, a state known as *nirvāna*. The fourth truth outlines the Noble Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering. In one common formula, that path comprises “three trainings”: insight, moral conduct, and mental discipline. This article identifies the teachings that formed the basis of Buddhist moral traditions in India and which were more or less influential in the various traditions of Buddhism that spread across Asia and more recently to the West.

Keywords: Buddhist philosophy, Indian Buddhism, Buddha, Four Noble Truths

In what is remembered in Buddhist traditions as the first discourse of the Buddha, the Buddha outlined Four Noble Truths that framed the basic doctrine of the early Buddhist tradition and the Theravāda tradition today. The four truths specify that (1) existence is characterized by “unsatisfactoriness” or suffering, literally a lack of ease (*duḥkha*); (2) suffering has a cause, identified as aversion, craving, and ignorance; and (3) because suffering has a cause it can also come to an end, a state known as *nirvāṇa*. The fourth truth outlines the Noble Eightfold Path to the cessation of suffering. In one common formula, that path comprises “three trainings”: insight (*prajñā*), moral conduct (*śīla*), and mental discipline (*samādhi*). While what precisely is meant by *śīla* in this context will be explored presently, this gives an indication that in some important sense ethics forms a central feature of the path to the ultimate spiritual goal for Buddhists. Furthermore, insofar as ethics is understood in the Socratic sense of “how one ought to live,” all elements of the threefold training would be considered aspects of Buddhist ethics. For

this reason, Buddhism has sometimes been considered an ethical system *par excellence*, and although there are other ways of understanding Buddhism, this is the lens through which Buddhism is viewed here. Buddhist practice and teachings vary widely, with three major branches or traditions (namely, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna), numerous schools of thought, and divergence in rituals and customs across Buddhist cultural areas. I have tried to identify the teachings that formed the basis of Buddhist moral traditions in India, where Buddhism originated, and which were more or less influential in the various traditions of Buddhism that spread across Asia and more recently to the West.

(p. 280) **Foundations of Buddhist Moral Thought: Dharma and Karma**

The root of Buddhist morality is not thought to be God or another supernatural being, nor even the Buddha himself, but Dharma, the “Law” or “Truth” of the nature of things, which the Buddha is said to have discovered and expounded. Dharma is the universal order of reality that embraces both natural and moral laws. The Buddha's teachings elucidate these laws, and they embody and are referred to as the Dharma. Dharma explains both the regular patterns apparent in the natural world, such as that of the seasons and planets, and the various states into which beings are born and reborn in the beginningless cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*). The pattern that explains the rebirth of beings is known as the law of karma, which reflects Dharma at the moral level. This law dictates that actions incur consequences that are consonant with the nature of the actions themselves. Generally speaking, according to karmic laws, good or moral deeds are a “shelter from anguish” (M.iii.171). They lead to happiness and pleasant conditions in this life, and better or “higher” states of rebirth, while bad or immoral actions lead to unpleasant results, suffering, and “lower” states of rebirth. For example, a life of hatred and violence is thought to cause rebirth in one of the many hells; selfishness and greed are said to lead to existence as a hungry ghost; ignorance and delusion produce rebirth as an animal. On the other hand, generosity, selflessness, and benevolence will yield a pleasant human life characterized by such things as wealth, good reputation, and freedom from fear and anxiety, and rebirth in a higher realm as a god (*deva*), or human. The latter is considered the most desirable rebirth, since the human realm is the realm from which it is easiest to attain liberation. To discern more clearly what “good” and “bad” actions mean in this context, we need to explore further the Buddhist approach to karma.

Karma, Intentions, and the Distinction between “Good” and “Bad” Actions

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The term *karma* literally means “action,” but like Dharma, it is a complex term with a range of meanings. It can refer, for example, to any or all of the following: an action itself, the agent of an action, the object of an action, or the results of an action. When referring to action, its meanings can include action in general, a habitual action, an occupation, or—echoing its original use in the context of Vedic ritual actions—ritualized action (s.v. “karma,” PTS). While there are various traditions of karmic discourse in Buddhist texts that do not all cohere, one important development in Indian thought associated with the Buddha was the shift in emphasis from external actions to the motive behind actions as key to their nature and consequences. (p. 281) Indeed, in a well-known passage the Buddha declared that “it is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech and mind” (A.iii.415). While the exact relationship between *cetanā* and the Western conception of “the will” are far from fully clear, this statement has been understood to mean that it is the mental impulses behind actions that are most decisive in shaping their nature, and in fact that actions are virtually equivalent to their motive.

This contributes to the standard view of Buddhist karma, which states that volitional actions lead to consequences that echo the nature of the volition, and that must inevitably be experienced by the agent. Because of the emphasis, it has sometimes been claimed—somewhat problematically—that “only intentional and ethically motivated actions have karmic effects”¹ and that “karmic actions are moral actions” (Keown 2005, 5). This emphasis on intention underlies a fundamental distinction in Buddhist thought between acts that are *kuśala* (P. *kusala*), “skillful” or “wholesome,” and those that are *akuśala* (P. *akusala*), “unskillful” or “unwholesome.” These terms are also understood and translated more generally as “good” and “bad.”² More particularly, *kuśala* refers to actions or states that are “spiritually intelligent,” that is, those that are grounded in wisdom, are salutary and lead to happiness, and are liberating in the sense of being conducive to *nirvāṇa* (e.g., A.i.263). *Nirvāṇa* is in fact equated with the complete elimination of all unwholesome qualities (S.iv.251). The psychological bases or “roots” (*mūla*) of wholesome actions are nongreed (*alobha*), nonhatred (Skt. *adveṣa*; P. *adosa*), and nondelusion (*amoha*), which can be understood positively as generosity or liberality, benevolence, and wisdom. Conversely, the causes of unwholesome actions are greed (*lobha*), hatred (Skt. *dveṣa*; P. *dosa*), and delusion (*moha*), which are also known as the three “poisons” or defilements (*kleśa*) at the root of suffering (M.i.47).

The criteria for deciding whether an action is *kuśala* or not corresponds with the range of meanings associated with it: the motivation in terms of greed, hatred, and delusion; the result (for the agent or others) in terms of happiness or suffering, and whether it contributes or hinders further wholesome states and progress along the path to liberation (Harvey 2000, 46–49). Thus, to call an action “good” or “bad” takes all of these into account, but it is its basis in greed, hatred, or delusion or not—what has been called its virtuous or unvirtuous motive—that is arguably the crucial distinguishing factor, and what fundamentally distinguishes good deeds from bad in Buddhism. Insofar as wholesome

actions lead to further happiness, *kuśala* overlaps with another important concept, that of “merit.”

(p. 282) Merit

The term “merit” (Skt. *puṇya*; P. *puñña*) refers to good or beneficial acts and their consequences, or to the quality of an action that is auspicious or brings fortune (Cousins 1996, 153). One useful translation of this term is “karmic fruitfulness” or “karmically fruitful” (Harvey 2000, 18), as it is suggestive of the common metaphor for karma as a “seed,” whose consequences are its fruit (*phala*) or its “ripening” (*vipāka*). Generally speaking, it is thought that an act that is good or wholesome (*kuśala*) is also meritorious (*puṇya*), meaning that it is beneficial in itself and will lead to beneficial consequences. On the other hand, if an act has unwholesome motives, it is “evil” or fruitless (*pāpa*) and unmeritorious (*apuṇya*; P. *apuñña*), and will lead to unfortunate, harmful consequences.

It is thought to be necessary to accumulate merit in order to make progress on the spiritual path, and merit making is a crucial concept for understanding Buddhist norms of conduct. So, for example, the relationship between lay Buddhists and the monastic order or Sangha relies on a mutual exchange of merit: by offering food, clothing, and other forms of material support to monastics, laypeople earn merit, and monks in turn gain merit by offering guidance and, most important, the gift of the Dharma to laypeople. Of course, if either act is done with the aim of selfish gain, the karmic benefits are diminished. The idea that it is especially “fruitful” to give to monks and nuns is expressed in the idea that the Sangha is a “field of merit” (*puṇya-kṣetra*) (e.g., M.iii.255–257). The notion that the Sangha, as well as the Buddha and Dharma, is productive “merit-fields” permits the idea that merit can be acquired through ritual actions, such as chanting the names of *sūtras* and offerings to Buddhas and bodhisattvas. In this way, while what we might call a strict or orthodox reading of karma doctrine upholds an ethic of intention, it also makes way for an ethic of works, and the distinction between ethics and devotion is not always clear.

While the idea that merit can itself lead to *nirvāṇa* is not unknown in the Pali canon and other literatures,³ one doctrinally significant canonical view is that meritorious deeds are necessary but not sufficient for attaining *nirvāṇa*, because *nirvāṇa* entails transcending the realm of karma and rebirth. That is, through eliminating the unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion, the Arhat—or “worthy one,” who becomes awakened with the benefit of a Buddha’s teaching—does not do anything karmically productive; all actions have ceased (S.iv.132–133). In this sense a liberated being is “beyond good and evil,” that is, beyond *puñña* and *pāpa* (Sn 520, 636). This also implies that liberated beings act in ways that are spontaneously (p. 283) wholesome: that is, they are virtuous (*kuśala*) by nature and do not need to deliberate about doing the “right thing” (Harvey 2000, 43–46).

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Merit transference (*pariṇāmana*) is the idea that the benefits and blessings of good deeds can be shared with others. For example, a common Buddhist practice is to dedicate the merit of offerings to the welfare of deceased relatives in the afterlife. Though the idea of merit transfer is clearly related to the pan-Buddhist belief in fields of merit, the belief that Buddhas and bodhisattvas accumulate infinite stores of merit by which they can benefit devotees is particularly associated with Mahāyāna. This Mahāyāna belief lends an idea proximate to that of grace: the Chinese and Japanese terms suggest that Buddhas and bodhisattvas are “fields of blessings” (Ch. *Futian*; Jap. *fukuden*). Such thinking finds its fullest expression in the Pure Land traditions, which hold that by virtue of their great merit, the Buddhas create Pure Lands into which followers may be reborn and easily attain liberation. Indeed, in the True Pure Land tradition (Jōdo Shinshū) this is taken to the extent of denying the efficacy of the devotees' meritorious acts altogether.

The idea of transferring merit is “theologically” challenging in that it violates the karmic law that we are all inheritors of our own karma, and no one else's: that one will experience the results of one's own actions alone. Though it may be problematic in this way, the idea of merit transfer must be acknowledged in any thorough understanding of Buddhist moral thought and practice.⁴

Precepts and Virtues

In a verse from one of the most well-known and oft-translated texts of Buddhism, the *Dhammapada* (*Verses of the Dharma*), the teachings of the Buddha are succinctly summarized:

The refraining from all that is harmful,
the undertaking of what is skilful,
the cleansing of one's mind
that is the teaching of the Buddhas. (Dhp 183)

This summary can help us to comprehend the “three trainings” mentioned above, which condense the Noble Eightfold Path into moral practice (*śīla*), meditation or mental discipline (*samādhi*), and insight (*prajñā*). On one understanding, moral conduct (*śīla*) involves refraining from what is evil (*pāpa*) at the grossest, physical (p. 284) level; mental discipline involves cultivating what is wholesome at the level of inner mental experience; and insight entails purifying one's mind at the most subtle level of consciousness. In this way we can see that *śīla* is not the only element of the Path that is relevant to Buddhist morality broadly understood, but it is certainly foundational, and it is to it that we now turn.

Śīla: The Moral Precepts

Though often translated loosely as “morality,” “ethics,” or “virtue,” more helpfully *śīla* may be understood in terms of propriety,⁵ specifically the good or proper conduct associated with awakening and awakened beings. In this it parallels the etymological meaning of the English term “ethics” (Gk. *ethikos*), in that it can refer to customary behavior. While *śīla* may also be used more broadly than this to refer to something like virtuous character or dispositions, in the context of the three trainings it refers to a set of moral injunctions or precepts. The five precepts (*pañca-śīla*) that all Buddhists, both lay and monastic, are expected to undertake, and which are therefore taken to be foundational moral norms, include the training precepts to refrain from:

1. Taking life
2. Taking what is not given
3. Harmful conduct in the pursuit of pleasure
4. False or misleading speech
5. Taking wine, spirits, and other causes of carelessness

The first precept against destroying life is associated with the pan-Indian value of “nonharming” (*ahiṃsā*), and is the most important precept in the sense that killing is the most blameworthy and karmically harmful deed. Because all sentient beings are “kin” in the cycle of samsara, and all share the wish to live and to avoid suffering and death, one should avoid harming all living beings, including animals and insects. The emphasis is on avoiding intentional harm, and so the accidental killing of insects, for example, is not considered a violation of the precept, even though the act of killing itself and the result (the death of the insect) would be considered karmically negative. Because the level of the virtue of the beings involved and the amount of effort involved in killing are factors in determining the degree of wrong, it is worse to kill a human than an animal, or a large versus small animal. The first precept and the ideal of nonharming underlie Buddhism's reputation for nonviolence, but it also has important implications for Buddhist views of the environment, abortion, and euthanasia.

(p. 285) The second precept against theft of others' property also includes the injunction to avoid fraud, cheating, borrowing without permission, and, in some interpretations, failing to repay loans and gambling. It entails numerous social responsibilities and has significant import for Buddhist perspectives on economics.⁶

The thrust of the third precept is to avoid harming others through one's sexual activity. For laypeople, this means eschewing adultery and other forms of illicit sex, such as rape and incest, and sex with inappropriate partners, such as prostitutes. Monks and nuns, on the other hand, are required to be celibate: in striving for awakening one is meant to curtail as much as possible all sensual attachments. Lying is considered an extremely harmful act, and the precept against it is closely associated with the injunction to avoid

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slanderous, abusive, and frivolous talk, which together are the four forms of wrong speech. Avoiding these upholds “right speech” on the Noble Eightfold Path.

The spirit of the fifth precept is that intoxication should be avoided because it undermines mindful conduct and obstructs seeing things “just as they are” (*yathābhūta*), the basis for wisdom. Intoxication is said to lead to various dangers, such as quarreling, illness, wasting money, and improper behavior, but the injunction to refrain from it is not necessarily interpreted as a complete ban on consuming alcohol, which has generally not been forbidden in Buddhist countries (Harvey 2000, 77–79). Because of their foundational place in Buddhist ethics, the five precepts are sometimes compared to the Jewish and Christian commandments, but they (and all the precepts) are perhaps better viewed as voluntary commitments to refrain from unwholesome (*akuśala*) and harmful actions (*pāpa*) (D.i.63). They are considered solemn commitments, however, and once taken on are thought to have negative repercussions if transgressed (see Harvey 2000, 69–82).

In addition to the five precepts, there are lists of eight precepts (*aṣṭāṅga-śīla*) undertaken by pious laypeople on holy days (*poṣadha*; P. *uposatha*), and ten precepts (*daśa-śīla*) taken up by novice monks and nuns. These include limits on the consumption of food and abstentions from personal adornment, entertainment, and certain luxuries. There are many other precepts—between 218 and 263 for monks and 279 and 380 for nuns—required of the Sangha, or the community of fully ordained monastics, reflecting their level of commitment to the attainment of *nirvāṇa*. This theoretically entails fully renouncing attachment to worldly life, including livelihood, home, and family, and so requires celibacy, minimal material possessions, and reliance on donations for food and clothing. In addition to elaborations on more explicitly “moral” rules against killing, lying, and sexual contact, the monastic code of conduct (Skt. *prātimokṣa*; P. *pātimokkha*) (p. 286) includes numerous rules of etiquette and general comportment, which might be thought to encourage monks and nuns to act like and have the bearing of an enlightened being.⁷

In general, the idea behind *śīla* is that unwholesome mental traits that lead to suffering are expressed in bodily actions such as stealing and killing, and verbal actions such as lying and malicious gossip. In taking on the precepts, one vows to refrain from acting in ways that express and nourish unwholesome dispositions. By making a conscious effort to refrain from such actions, one addresses the expression of such harmful dispositions at the grossest, physical or verbal level, and thereby “starves” the underlying unwholesome mental traits and helps to cultivate wholesome ones. The importance of cultivating positive, wholesome dispositions brings us to what we might call the Buddhist virtues.

Virtues

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While the Buddhist discourses include various lists of virtues or wholesome qualities to be cultivated,⁸ several stand out as distinctively important. We have already introduced liberality, benevolence, and wisdom, the “cardinal virtues” of Buddhism that oppose, respectively, greed, hatred, and delusion, the three root causes of suffering. The disciplinary precepts, though expressed as abstentions, are grounded in these positive qualities. For example, the first precept against destroying life and value of “nonharm” (*ahiṃsā*) entails not only a lack of hatred (*dveṣa*), but also an attitude of empathy and concern: a “trembling for the welfare of all beings” (D.i.4). In fact, such sentiments are the fundamental ground of buddhahood, for the Buddha is said to have come into being “for the welfare of the multitudes, for the happiness of the multitudes, out of sympathy for the world” (A.i.22).

Nonhatred (*adveṣa*; P. *adosa*) is associated with the two fundamental and related dispositions of friendliness and compassion. Friendliness or loving-kindness (Skt. *maitri*; P. *mettā*) is characterized by the wish for all beings to enjoy happiness. Compassion is the loving response to the anguish of fellow beings, and is characterized by the thought, “may all beings be liberated from suffering.” Compassion (*karuṇā*) is particularly stressed as the preeminent virtue in the Mahāyāna tradition, (p. 287) which emphasizes the development of “great compassion” or universal compassion for all sentient beings.⁹

Loving-kindness and compassion are said to counter unwholesome tendencies toward anger and the impulse to harm. Along with “sympathetic joy” (*muditā*: rejoicing in others' happiness) and “equanimity” (*upekṣā*: even-mindedness and impartiality), they are known as the “divine virtues” or “pure abodes” (*brahmavihāra*) because of their association with elevated meditative states and higher realms of rebirth (see Aronson 1980). Overall, we might summarize the cluster of virtues associated with the absence of hatred with a verse from the *Sutta-Nipāta*, one of the earliest texts of the tradition, which exhorts: “Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let him cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings” (Sn.v.149).

Nongreed (*alobha*) or liberality is the opposite of the impulse to cling to objects or ideas, and is the basis of generosity and giving (*dāna*). This is an extremely significant ideal in Buddhist traditions. As the Mahāyāna master śāntideva defines it: “The perfection of generosity is said to result from the mental attitude of relinquishing all that one has to all people” (BCA v.10). Thus, generosity opposes greed in that it reflects the willingness to give up possessions and to renounce worldly attachments; hence, the word for generosity (Skt. *tyāga*; P. *cāga*) also means renunciation. The practice of generosity is the positive counterpoint to the precept against taking what is not given. In habitually giving, one is thought to nourish sensitivity to the needs of others, and to gain joy and peace of mind. Along with *śīla* and meditation, *dāna* was prescribed by the Buddha for laypeople as a foundational ethico-spiritual practice. It is the first of ten “bases for creating merit” (P. *puñña-kiriya-vatthus*) in the Buddha's discourses (e.g., D.iii.218) and the first in a standard list of “perfections” (*pāramitā*) or transcendent virtues in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions.

The “generous patron” (*dānapati*) is therefore one of Buddhism's moral ideals, exemplified in the popular South Asian figure of King Vessantara, one of the previous incarnations of the Buddha who willingly gave up not only material possessions when asked but also his wife and child. Such heroic giving is characteristic of *bodhisattvas*, or beings who are dedicated to becoming fully enlightened Buddhas. While still a *bodhisattva* the Buddha also famously gave his life to feed a starving mother tigress,¹⁰ and *bodhisattva* literature (e.g., *Jātaka* tales and Mahāyāna *sūtras*) abounds with such tales of supererogatory giving. But such exalted giving is thought to begin with small acts of generosity, such as the offerings of water often seen on Tibetan shrines.¹¹

(p. 288) While loving-kindness, compassion, and generosity are foundational virtues in Buddhist traditions, in themselves they are insufficient for achieving the highest moral perfection and ultimate state of enlightenment. To attain liberation one must overcome ignorance (*avidyā*; P. *avijjā*), which is considered the greatest impurity and the primary cause of suffering and of continued rebirth (Dhp. v.241; A.iv.195). The perspicacity to see things “just as they are” (*yathābhūta*) is known as insight (*prajñā*). As one of the “three trainings” of the Noble Eightfold path, it comprises “right view” (understanding karma, rebirth, and the Four Noble Truths) and “right intention” (a resolve to turn away from malice and sensual attachments and toward calm loving-kindness), and relies on mental discipline cultivated through mindful awareness (*smṛti*) and concentration (*samādhi*). Insight is the primary distinguishing characteristic of the Buddha, whose enlightenment arose through awakening (*bodhi*) to the nature and origin of suffering and the way to its end. For the Arhat, insight into the “three marks” (*trilakṣana*) of reality—as impermanent (*anitya*), without self (*anātman*), and unsatisfactory—is what finally uproots the latent tendencies that impede enlightenment and thus purifies the mind. In the Mahāyāna tradition as well, insight into emptiness (*śūnyatā*), or the lack of inherent nature of all phenomena, including the self, cuts the impurities (*kleśa*) at their root by removing all basis for a sense of “me and mine” (e.g., ŚS 242.1–6). This allows for the *bodhisattva*'s selfless concern for all sentient beings and “completes” or “perfects” (*pāramitā*) his or her other virtues. In this sense, the virtue of nondelusion (*amoha*), expressed positively as wisdom or insight (*prajñā*), is the most fundamental Buddhist virtue that transforms other “ordinary” (*laukika*; P. *lokiya*) virtues such as generosity and patience into transcendent (*lokottara*; P. *lokuttara*) ones that yield not just a better rebirth but full awakening.

Mahāyāna Developments

Mahāyāna Buddhism, a broad branch of Buddhism comprising numerous texts and schools, became the predominant Buddhist tradition in Tibet and East Asia. The goal in Mahāyāna is buddhahood rather than liberation from suffering (*nirvāṇa*) per se. A being who aims to become a fully enlightened Buddha (*samyaksambodhibuddha*) is a *bodhisattva* (“being for awakening”), and while already an ideal in Theravāda, the *bodhisattva* became a particular focus of Mahāyāna Buddhism, along with the doctrine of

emptiness (*śūnyatā*).¹² The goal of buddhahood is taken to mean that one aims to become a being that liberates others. The ardent wish to devote oneself to the salvation of others is known as “the mind of awakening” (*bodhicitta*), and leads to the *bodhisattva*'s characteristic vow to remain in the endless rounds of rebirth working (p. 289) for the welfare of all sentient beings. As śāntideva expresses it: “For as long as there is a universe in space, I will remain, progressing in wisdom, doing the good of the world” (ŚS 363.13,14; s.a. BCA iii.6–21). This all-embracing compassion is the basis for the Mahāyāna's self-designation as the “great vehicle,” and is reflected in the *bodhisattva* precepts taken by most East Asian monastics, based on the *Fan-wang ching* (*Sūtra of Brahma's Net*), which in some ways came to eclipse the Vinaya in importance in East Asian contexts. These precepts can be taken on by laypeople as well, and Mahāyāna schools outside of India in particular have tended to emphasize the accessibility of the *bodhisattva* path to all, lay and monastic.

Mahāyāna texts present varying accounts of the *bodhisattva*'s path to buddhahood. The *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*'s ten-stage process is one important example, with each stage corresponding to the perfection of a virtue: generosity (*dāna*), moral conduct (*śīla*), patience (*kṣanti*), energy (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), insight (*prajñā*), skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*), vows (*prañidhāna*), power (*bala*), and knowledge (*jnāna*). There is an obvious continuity between these and non-Mahāyāna virtues, but there is also an increased focus on compassion and having the “skillful means” (*upāya-kauśalya*) to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings. There is also an expanded notion of *śīla* in Mahāyāna. In texts such as the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* and the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, *śīla* incorporates the “restraint” (*saṃvara*) of the lay precepts and monastic code, but adds to these the “collection of wholesome states” (*kuśala-dharma-saṃgraha*), achieved by practicing the perfections and “working for the welfare of beings” (*sattvārtha-kriyā*) through ministering to their spiritual and practical needs. These practices yield infinitely vast stores of merit (*puṇya*) through which *bodhisattvas* and Buddhas are thought to be able to benefit sentient beings.¹³

To be a *bodhisattva* means that one's *raison d'être* is to save other beings from suffering, and this altruistic aim can at times “trump” obedience to ordinary moral precepts (*śīla*). So, for example, Mahāyāna literature includes stories of *bodhisattvas* lying, stealing, and even killing out of the compassionate demand to help sentient beings (ŚS 140, 163f).¹⁴ Such deeds are considered an aspect of the *bodhisattva*'s skillful means, and are certainly one of the more striking features of Mahāyāna ethics. Succinctly put, the idea is that “even what is proscribed is permitted for a compassionate person who sees it will be of some benefit” (BCA v.84). These violations of standard moral precepts are only endorsed for *bodhisattvas* whose actions are grounded in an understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and whose compassionate motive is pure. In addition to instances where killing another being, stealing, lying, (p. 290) or engaging in sexuality are seen as necessary, the emphasis on selfless compassion also supports the ideal of heroic self-sacrifice, which might otherwise be prohibited as suicide and a violation of the first precept. The *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā-śāstra*, for example, advocates giving away one's head or marrow for others, and in the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-Sūtra*) the *bodhisattva*

Bhaiṣajyarāja burns his body as a “living candle” in service and gratitude, which leads to his full enlightenment.¹⁵ Skillful means has also been invoked to justify violence in defense of the Dharma, though the use of violence to defend Buddhism is not strictly a Mahāyāna phenomenon.¹⁶ There is still the sense that such acts are ethically problematic in that they entail negative karmic repercussions, but the merit of the bodhisattva's altruistic willingness to endure such consequences—including aeons in hell—is thought to substantially or in some cases completely obviate any negative karma.

The Vajrayāna (“Diamond Vehicle”) tradition as well, which became dominant in Tibet and influenced Buddhist schools in East Asia, is associated with antinomianism. The tantric texts that are the basis for the Vajrayāna upheld that since all phenomena lack inherent nature, unskillful qualities such as anger and lust could be transmuted into positive energies. These “impure” states could thus be used as tools for attaining liberation rapidly, even in this lifetime. This might entail the violation of conventional norms and moral precepts by eating meat, drinking wine, or engaging in sexual intercourse. Even if only enacted symbolically, these practices are generally thought to be the domain of only very advanced practitioners under guidance of a teacher, and (in the monastic context) on a foundation of adherence to monastic discipline and the *bodhisattva* vows. The predominant Gelug (dGe-lugs) school in Tibet emphasized such restrictions, and advocated the practice of “sexual yoga” as a meditative visualization only. However, some schools such as the rNying-ma have permitted the actual practice of sexual yoga, and unconventional behavior, both social and moral, is characteristic of exemplary tantric adepts (*mahasiddhas*). Thus, while it is perhaps true to say that transgressive behavior is most commonly enacted only symbolically and ritually, it is likely unwise to ignore the normative function of such behavior in the Tibetan tradition.¹⁷

(p. 291) Contemporary Expressions: Engaged Buddhism

One of the marks of contemporary Buddhism is the effort by Buddhist scholars and thinkers to apply Buddhist principles to contemporary moral issues and social problems. This socially “engaged” turn draws on traditional Buddhist concepts such as no-self, emptiness, and interdependence; values such as compassion, loving-kindness (P. *mettā*), and nonharming (*ahiṃsā*); and the practice of meditation. Such ideas and values are seen to impel mindful work for the welfare of others through such efforts as building hospitals and hospices; doing peace, development, and justice work; serving prisoners by teaching meditation; and environmental activism. A growing body of literature by scholars, both Western and Asian, apply Buddhist perspectives to contemporary moral issues such as abortion, suicide and euthanasia, sexual ethics, human rights, and environmental issues.

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Some of the more notable examples of engaged Buddhist thinkers and movements include Master Zhengyan (Cheng Yen), the Taiwanese Buddhist nun who founded the Tzu Chi Foundation. Her four-million-member organization focuses on charity, medical care, culture, and education, which she relates to the four “divine virtues” (*brahmavihāra*). Her work, which is part of a broader movement of “humanistic Buddhism” (*ren-sheng fojiao*), has, among other things, been instrumental in establishing free medical care in Taiwan. In Sri Lanka, the lay Buddhist leader A. T. Ariyaratna founded a grassroots movement for Buddhist-based development that has grown to be the largest nongovernmental organization in Asia (Sarvodaya Shramadana). His theory of development is based on his understanding of a Buddhist economics aimed at meeting basic needs (environmental, physical, social, cultural, and spiritual) rather than growth, and an analysis of the causes and cures for suffering at the village as well as individual level.

In pre-war Vietnam, the Zen leader Thich Nhat Hahn cofounded the School of Youth for Social Service to mobilize Buddhists to work for social welfare. He was a strong activist for peace during the Vietnam War and has continued this work through the Order of Interbeing since his exile. He writes and teaches tirelessly on “being peace” (Hanh 1987). Like Hanh, Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Tibetan Dalai Lama and exiled leader of the Tibetan people, has been profoundly influential to engaged Buddhism. The principled pacifism that has been his stance vis-à-vis the Chinese; his vision for world peace, which includes the creation of demilitarized “Zones of Peace” (Gyatso 2000, 222); and his emphasis on universal responsibility have developed Mahāyāna morality in a way that has been uniquely inspiring and applicable to a contemporary global audience, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist. There are numerous other “engaged” Buddhist leaders, including Daisaku Ikeda of Soka Gakai International, Cambodia's Maha Ghosananda, Aung San Suu Kyi of Burma, and Thailand's Sulak Sivaraksa, all known particularly for their advocacy of nonviolent means of reconciliation and innovative, Buddhist-based political and social reform.

(p. 292) In analyzing such movements, scholars have debated whether or not Buddhism can be understood to be inherently “socially engaged.” Some emphasize that as a world-renouncing religion Buddhism is not fundamentally oriented to social change, and that contemporary Buddhist-based social change movements should be understood within the historical context of modern, Western and/or Christian-based influences.¹⁸ Others dispute this perspective and point to a long history of Buddhist involvement with society and state in Asia.¹⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “engaged Buddhism” to reflect his view that all Buddhist practice has political and social import, insofar as the suffering that it aims to alleviate is experienced by humans and other beings who exist within social and political networks and institutions. In support, Sallie King (2005, 3) argues that if engaged Buddhism is assumed to be the result of Western influence, it problematically discounts the agency of engaged Buddhists themselves. Certainly it is apparent that if socially engaged Buddhism is *defined as* a Western-influenced movement, it begs the question as to the social relevance of Buddhism. It is clear in any case that many

contemporary Buddhists, both in Asia and the West, employ uniquely Buddhist principles and practices in their approach to current moral and social issues.

Buddhist Moral Theory

The principle meta-ethical issue with which scholars have been preoccupied is how best to characterize Buddhist ethics using Western moral categories. Closely related to this issue is the place of ethics in Buddhist soteriology. Early on in such discussions, Winston King and Melford Spiro argued for a distinction between a “kammic ethic” of good works, practiced by laymen with the aim of gaining merit and a better rebirth, and a “nibbanic ethic” focused on meditation and insight, practiced by monks in the hope of *nirvāṇa*.²⁰ This view was aligned with an understanding of *nirvāṇa* as a nonmoral state of individual annihilation, and the idea that ethics (namely, *śīla* and moral virtues) are transcended in awakening. This analysis in turn supported a utilitarian reading of Buddhist ethics whereby *śīla* and other aspects of Buddhist morality are merely a means to the end of *nirvāṇa*, which, like the good in utilitarianism, is defined in terms of ending suffering.

Against this view, Damien Keown (1992) forcefully argued that Buddhist ethics could be better understood in terms of an Aristotelian virtue ethic. The utilitarian (p. 293) model is not appropriate to Buddhism, he claims, because the qualities reflected in Buddhist moral precepts and virtues embody wholesome (*kuśala*) qualities that are intrinsically related to the goal of awakening, rather than merely a means to that end. Because disciplined conduct (*śīla*) and virtues are goods in themselves, Keown asserts, Buddhist ethics must be understood to be teleological rather than consequentialist, and the basis for norms of character and conduct in Buddhism is that one should cultivate a certain type of character that instantiates the good of awakening.

Keown's rejection of the “transcendancy thesis,” or the idea that morality is only a means to the end of *nirvāṇa*, has been largely accepted, as has the framework of Buddhist ethics as a virtue ethic. However, some recent work on Indian Mahāyāna ethics has brought that analysis into question. In particular, the Mahāyāna idea that bodhisattvas may transgress moral precepts as a skillful means to help liberate sentient beings from suffering, and also the aim to maximize the benefit or merit of any given action, evinces a consequentialist form of reasoning that ill-suits a virtue ethic.²¹ Neither does the bodhisattva's heroic aim of liberating *all* beings from suffering, even at the cost of his or her own well-being, sit well with an Aristotelian model of ethics, according to which actions or traits are endorsed if they contribute to the happiness or flourishing (*eudaimonia*) of the agent.²² If so, Mahāyāna ethics might better understood as consequentialist rather than eudaimonist, and more aligned with utilitarianism than Aristotelianism, bringing the comparison of Buddhist ethics with Western moral theories full circle. This may in turn indicate that Peter Harvey (2000, 51) is right to suggest that no single Western moral theory adequately captures the complexities and diversity in

Buddhist moral thought, though it should not preclude using Western ethics as a “skillful means” for understanding Buddhist texts and traditions.

Abbreviations

References in the form of “D.i.4” are to a collection (*nikāya*), volume (i), and page number (4) of the Pāli Text Society edition of the Theravāda Buddhist canon. The collections are abbreviated as follows:

D *Dīgha Nikāya*

M *Majjhima Nikāya*

A *Aṅguttara Nikāya*

S *Saṃyutta Nikāya*

(p. 294) BCA 1996. *Bodhicaryāvatāra/Śāntideva*. Trans. Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Dhp 2004. *The Dhammapada: Verses on the Way: A New Translation of the Teachings of the Buddha, with a Guide to Reading the Text*, by Glenn Wallis. New York: Modern Library.

PTS 1921–1925. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*. Chipstead. Pali Text Society. (Available at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/pali/>)

Sn 1994 [1985]. *The Sutta-Nipāta*. Trans. H. Saddhatissa. London: Routledge Curzon.

ŚS 1970. *Śikṣāsamuccaya: A Compendium of Buddhist Teaching, Compiled by Śāntideva*. Ed. Cecil Bendall. Bibliotheca Buddhica. I. Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag.

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Notes:

(9.) For a treatment of the role and different types of compassion in Mahāyāna see *Madhyamakāvātāra* in *Compassion in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Hopkins (London: Rider, 1980).

(1.) Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma: Transformation in Ameridindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), p. 130. For examples of where karma does not follow this normative model see Jessica Main, "The Karma of Others: Stories from the *Milindapañha* and the *Petavatthu-aṭṭhakathā*," in *Revisioning Karma: The eBook*, ed. Charles Prebish, Dale Wright, and Damien Keown (Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, 2007).

(2.) For a discussion of the history and meaning of the term *kuśala* see Lance Cousins, "Good or skilful? *Kuśala* in Canon and Commentary," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3(1996): 136–164.

(3.) See, for example, James Egge, *Religious Giving and the Invention of Karma in Theravāda Buddhism*, Curzon Studies in Asian Religions (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2002), pp. 107–113. The idea that merit can itself lead to awakening is also found in the "lessons" (Sk. *avadāna*; P. *apadāna*). For a discussion of this literature see Richard

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Robinson, Willard Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions: A Historical Introduction*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2005), pp. 70–72.

(4.) For a discussion of merit transference and its apparent contravention of karma theory, see Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma*, pp. 131–139.

(5.) Thank you to Jay Garfield for this suggestion.

(6.) For examples of the application of this precept, and Buddhist principles in general, to economics and political rule, see Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer, *Ethics, Wealth and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), and Jeffrey Hopkins, *Nagarjuna's Precious Garland: Buddhist Advice for Living and Liberation* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 2007).

(7.) For studies of monastic discipline see John Holt, *Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapiñaka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981); Charles S. Prebish, *Buddhist Monastic Discipline* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1996); and M. Wijayaratna, *Buddhist Monastic Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

(8.) In the Theravāda tradition the ten perfections (*dasapāramitā*) is a well-known list of virtues. It includes generosity (*dāna*), moral practice (*sīla*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), wisdom (*pañña*), energy (*virīya*), patience (*khanti*), honesty (*sacca*), determination (*adhiññhāna*), loving-kindness (*mettā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*). For a list of Mahāyāna virtues, see “Mahāyāna developments” below.

(10.) The story of the bodhisattva and the tigress occurs in Āryaśūra's (fourth century CE) *Jātakamalā*, available in translation in *Jātakamalā: The Marvelous Companion: Life Stories of the Buddha* (Berkeley, CA: Dharma Publishing, 1983).

(11.) For a discussion of gift giving in Buddhist cultures see Reiko Ohnuma, “Gift,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald Lopez, Jr. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 103–123.

(12.) See, in this volume, the chapters by Dunne, Powers, Klein, and Ziporyn.

(13.) This is in contrast to the Arhat, who (as indicated) in liberation is thought to transcend both evil (*pāpa*) and “good” vis-a-vis *puṇya*. See Barbra Clayton, *Moral Theory in śāntideva's śikṣāsamuccaya: Cultivating the Fruits of Virtue*, *Critical Studies in Buddhism* (Abington, UK: Routledge, 2006), pp. 76–88. For descriptions of the bodhisattva path see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, London, Routledge, 1989), pp. 204–214; and Asanga's *Chapter on Ethics, with the Commentary of Tsong-Kha-Pa, The Basic Path to Awakening, The Complete Bodhisattva*, trans. Mark Tatz, (Lewiston/ Queenston: Edwin Mellon Press, 1986).

(14.) For a discussion of the skillful breaking of precepts in Mahāyāna see Harvey 2000, pp. 134–140, and Michael Pye, *Skillful Means: A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Duckworth, 1978).

(15.) Jan Yun-hua, "Buddhist Self-Immolation in Medieval China," in *History of Religions* 4 (1964-1965), pp. 256, 257. For a discussion of the phenomenon of self-immolation in the context of the Vietnam War, see Sallie B. King, "Those who burn themselves for peace: Quaker and Buddhist Self-Immolators during the Vietnam War," *Buddhist Christian Studies* 20(2000): 127-150.

(16.) For examples in the Sri Lankan context see Tessa J. Bartholomeusz, *In Defense of Dharma: Just War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002). On Buddhism and war in East Asia see Paul Demiéville, "Le Bouddhisme et la guerre: postscriptum à 'L'Histoire des moines guerriers du Japon'" in his *Choix d'études bouddhiques (1929-1970)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 261-299, and Mikael S. Adolphson, *The Teeth and Claws of the Buddha: Monastic Warriors and Sōhei in Japanese History* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2007).

(17.) So argues Roger Jackson in "No/Responsibility: Saraha, 'Siddha Ethics' and the Transcendancy Thesis," in *Universal Responsibility: A Felicitation Volume in Honour of His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Ramesh Chandra Tewari and Krishna Nath (Delhi: Foundation for Universal Responsibility, 1996), pp. 79-110. See also David Gray, "Compassionate Violence? On the Ethical Implications of Tantric Buddhist Ritual," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 14(2007): 239-271.

(18.) Christopher S. Queen, "Introduction," in Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, pp. 1-44.

(19.) For example, on the social involvement of monks in Sri Lanka see Walpola Rahula, *Heritage of the Bhikkhu: The Buddhist Tradition of Service* (New York: Grove Press, 1974).

(20.) See Winston L. King, *In the Hope of Nibbāna* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1964), and Melford E. Spiro, *Buddhism and Society: A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

(21.) Clayton, *Moral Theory*, pp. 102-106.

(22.) Charles Goodman, "Consequentialism, Agent-Neutrality, and Mahāyāna Ethics," in *Philosophy East and West* 58(1) (2008): 17-35.

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