Buddhist Ethics

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1. Introduction: Ethics and Interdependence

There are two temptations to be resisted when approaching Buddhist moral theory. The first is to assimilate Buddhist ethics to some system of Western ethics, usually either some form of Utilitarianism or some form of virtue ethics. The second is to portray Buddhist ethical thought as constituting some grand system resembling those that populate Western metaethics. The first temptation, of course, can be avoided simply by avoiding the second. In Buddhist philosophical and religious literature we find many texts that address moral topics, and a great deal of attention devoted to accounts of virtuous and vicious actions, virtuous and vicious states of character and of virtuous and vicious lives. However, we find very little direct attention to the articulation of sets of principles that determine which actions, states of character or motives are virtuous or vicious, and no articulation of sets of obligations or rights.

This is not because Buddhist moral theorists were and are not sufficiently sophisticated to think about moral principles or about the structure of ethical life, and certainly not because Buddhist theorists think that ethics is not important enough to do systematically. It is instead because from a Buddhist perspective there are simply too many dimensions of moral life and moral assessment to admit a clean moral theory. Buddhist ethical thought has instead been concerned with understanding how the actions of sentient beings are located and locate those beings within the web of dependent origination, or *pratītya-sammutpāda*. This web is complex, and there is a lot to be said. And so Buddhists have had a lot to say. But the web is also untidy, and so what Buddhists have had to say resists easy systematization.

There is one last temptation to resist, and that is to see the various Buddhist philosophical and religious traditions as constituting a homogenous whole. An enormous variety of positions have been defended within the Buddhist world on just about every philosophical position, and ethics is no exception. Here I will confine my remarks to one strand of Buddhist moral thought, that beginning with the articulation of the four noble truths at Sarnath and running through the work of Nāgārjuna in his *Ratnavalī*, Candrakīrti in *Madhyamakāvatāra*, and Śāntideva in *Bodhicaryāvatāra*. In particular, I will be ignoring a rich lode of moral literature comprised by the *Jataka* tales and the vast corpus of Buddhist morality tales that populate Buddhist literature that offer a range of moral examples, ideals, and cases for consideration. I hope that the observations I offer regarding this narrow path through Indian Buddhist moral thought will serve to show that Buddhist moral thought represents a reasonable alternative way of thinking about our moral life, one that can engage Western moral theory in profitable dialogue. I believe that each tradition of ethical thought has a great deal to learn from the other, and that learning begins with attention to what each has to say on its own terms.

Thinking about the good from a Buddhist perspective begins from the first principle of Buddhist metaphysics—the fact of thoroughgoing interdependence. Every event and every phenomenon is causally and constitutively dependent upon countless other events and phenomena and in turn is part of the causal ancestries and constitutive bases of countless other phenomena. Moral reflection on action must take all of these dimensions of dependence into account. To focus merely on motivation, or on character, or on the action itself, or on its consequences for others, would be to ignore much that is important.

Interdependence is relevant when thinking about identity and interest as well. Many Western moral theorists begin by taking a kind of ontological and axiological individualism for granted in several respects. First, *agency* is taken to reside in individual actors, with an attendant focus on *responsibility* as a central area of moral

concern. Second, *interest* is taken to be *au fond* an individual matter, and even when the self is consciously deconstructed, as it is by Parfit, interest is taken to attach to individual stages of selves. Third, and consequent on these, a conflict between egoistic and altruistic interests and motivations is regarded as at least prima facie rational, if not morally defensible or ultimately rational.

Buddhist accounts of identity reflect the commitment to interdependence. The boundary between self and other are regarded as at best conventional and relatively insignificant, and at worst deeply illusory. Agency is not taken as a primary moral category, at least if taken to indicate a unique point of origin of action in an individual self, and so moral responsibility is not foregrounded in moral reflection. Interest is hence also seen as a shared phenomenon, and egoism as fundamentally and obviously irrational. We will work out the ramifications of these views as we proceed.

Nāgārjuna argues persuasively that to understand dependent origination is to understand the four noble truths. The truth of suffering sets the problem that Buddhism sets out to solve. The universe is pervaded by suffering and the causes of suffering. The Buddha did not set out to *prove* this at Sarnath. He took it as a datum, one that is obvious to anyone on serious reflection, though one that escapes most of us most of the time precisely because of our evasion of serious reflection in order not to face this fact. The Buddha also assumed that suffering is a bad thing. If one disagrees with this assessment, moral discourse has on basis. There is no problem to be solved. If you just love headaches, don't bother taking aspirin. If you don't, you might consider how to obtain relief.

The Buddha then argued that suffering does not just happen. It arises as a consequence of actions conditioned by attachment and aversion, each of which in turn is engendered by confusion regarding the nature of reality. This triune root of suffering is represented in the familiar Buddhist representation of the Wheel of Life with the pig, snake and rooster at the hub, the six realms of transmigration (or

aspects of the phenomenology of suffering as we might understand them less cosmologically) turning around them, structured by the twelve links of dependent origination (a detailed psychology of perception and action), all of which is depicted as resting in the jaws of death, the great fear of which propels so much of our maladaptive psychology and moral failure.

Attention to the second noble truth allows us to begin to see how very different Buddhist moral thought is from most Western moral thought: the three roots of suffering are each regarded as moral defilements, and are not seen as especially heterogeneous in character. None of them is seen is especially problematic in most Western moral theory, and indeed each of the first two—attachment and aversion—is valourised in at least some contexts in some systems, particularly that of Aristotle. The third, confusion, is rarely seen in the West as a *moral* matter, unless it is because one has a *duty* to be clear about things. But this is far from the issue in Buddhist moral theory. Buddhism is about solving a problem; the problem is suffering; the three root vices are vices because they engender the problem. The moral theory here is not meant to articulate a set of imperatives, nor to establish a calculus of utility through which to assess actions, nor to assign responsibility, praise or blame, but rather to solve a problem. The problem is that the world is pervaded by unwanted suffering. The diagnosis of the cause of the problem sets the agenda for its solution.

The third truth articulated at Sarnath is that, because suffering depends upon confusion, attraction and aversion, it can be eliminated by eliminating these causes. And the fourth, which starts getting the ethics spelled out in a more determinate form, presents the path to that solution. The eightfold path is central to an articulation of the moral domain as it is seen in Buddhist theory, and careful attention to reveals additional respects in which Buddhists develop ethics in a different way than do Western moral theorists. The eightfold path comprises

correct view, correct intention, correct speech, correct propriety, correct livelihood, correct effort, correct mindfulness and correct meditation.

While many, following the traditional Tibetan classification of three trainings, focus specifically on correct speech, action and livelihood as the specifically ethical content of the path, this is in fact too narrow, and misses the role of the path in Buddhist practice and in the overall moral framework through which Buddhism recommends engagement with the world. The eightfold path identifies not a set of rights or duties, nor a set of virtues, but a set of areas of concern or of dimensions of conduct. The path indicates the complexity of human moral life and the complexity of the sources of suffering. To lead a life conducive to the solution of the problem of suffering is to pay close heed to these many dimensions of conduct.

Our *views* matter morally. It is not simply an epistemic fault to think that material goods guarantee happiness, that narrow self-interest is the most rational motivation, that torture is a reasonable instrument of national policy or that women are incapable of rational thought. Such views are morally problematic. To hold such views is not to commit a morally neutral cognitive error, like thinking that Florida is south of Hawai'i. It is to be involved in a way of taking up with the world that is at the very root of the suffering we all wish to alleviate. It is not only what we *do* that matters, but what we *intend*. Intention grounds action, and even when it misfires, it matters to who we are and to what we become what we intend to do.

The eightfold path, which represents the earliest foundation of Buddhist ethical thought, must always be thought of as a *path*, and not as a set of prescriptions. That is, it comprises a set of areas of concern, domains of life on which to reflect, respects in which one can improve one's life, and in sum, a way of moving cognitively, behaviorally and affectively from a state in which one is bound by and causative of suffering to one in which one is immune from suffering and in which one's thought, speech and action tends to alleviate it.

The eightfold path may be represented as broadly consequentialist, but it is certainly not utilitarian, and it is consequentialist only in a thin sense—that is, what makes it a path worth following is that things work out better to the extent that we follow it. By following this path, by attending to these areas of concern in which our actions and thought determine the quality of life for ourselves and others, we achieve greater individual perfection, facilitate that achievement for those around us, and reduce suffering. There is no boundary drawn here that circumscribes the ethical dimensions of life; there is no distinction between the obligatory, the permissible and the forbidden; there is no distinction drawn between the moral and the prudential; the public and the private; the self-regarding and the other-regarding. Instead, there is a broad indication of the complexity of the solution to the problem of suffering.

2. Action Theory and Karma

The term "karma" plays a central role in any Buddhist moral discussion. It is a term of great semantic complexity and must be handled with care, particularly given its intrusion into English with a new range of central meanings. Most centrally, "karma" means *action*. Derivatively, it means *the consequences of action*. Given the Buddhist commitment to the universality of dependent origination, all action arises from the karmic consequences of past actions, and all action has karmic consequences. Karma is not a cosmic bank account on this view, but rather the natural causal sequellae of actions. Karma accrues to any action, simply in virtue of interdependence, and karmic consequences include those for oneself and for others, as well as both individual and collective karma.

Buddhist action theory approaches human action and hence ethics in a way slightly divergent from that found in any Western action theory, and it is impossible to understand moral assessment without attention to action theory. Buddhist philosophers distinguish in any action the *intention*, the *act* itself (whether mental,

purely verbal, or non-verbally physical as well) and the *completion* or the final state of affairs resulting directly from the action itself. If I intend to give ten dollars to *Care*, hand over the ten dollars to a *Care* worker, who then uses it to bribe a policeman, beneficial karma accrues from the intention, beneficial karma from the act, but non-beneficial karma from the completion. If I intend to steal your medicine, but instead pocket the poison that had been placed on your bedstand by your malicious nurse, thereby saving your life, negative karma accrues from the intention, but positive karma from the act and from the completion, and so forth.

It is important to see that karma isn't additive or subtractive. There is no calculus of utility or of merit points here. The fact that something I do is beneficial does not cancel the fact that something else I do is harmful. It just means that I have done something good and something harmful. I have generated both kinds of consequences, not achieved some neutral state. No amount of restitution I pay for destroying the garden you worked so hard to cultivate takes away the damage I have done. It only provides you with some benefit as well. Truth and reconciliation commissions do indeed reveal the truth and promote reconcilisation, and that is good. But to pretend that they thereby erase the horrific consequences of the deeds they reveal for those who are reconciled is naïve.

Note as well that the relevant kinds of karma include the impact on my character and that of others, such as the tendency to reinforce or to undermine generosity or malice and the degree to which the action promotes general well-being. There is hence attention both to virtue and to consequence here, and attention to the character of and consequences for anyone affected by the action. The fundamental facts relevant to moral assessment are causal interdependence and the moral equivalence of all moral agents and patients.

Buddhist moral assessment and reasoning hence explicitly takes into account a number of dimensions of action. We cannot in this framework ask whether a particular action is good or evil *simpliciter*, nor can we ask what our obligations or

permissions are. Instead we ask about the states of character reflected by and consequent to our intentions, our words, our motor acts, and their consequences. We ask about the pleasure and pain produced, and about how actions reflect and enhance or ignore and undermine our universal responsibility. In sum, we ask how these actions are relevant to solving our collective problem—the omnipresence of suffering. The fact that a terrible outcome ensues from a good intention does not make the outcome morally acceptable; nor does a good outcome somehow cancel malicious intent. Each component of action has its consequences and reflects morally relevant features of its genesis.

Attention to this approach to moral assessment and reasoning reveals that in this framework there is no morally significant distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. Nor is there any distinction between moral and prudential motivations. Motivations that appear to be immoral but prudential are, on deeper analysis, simply confused. Nor is there any limit to the domain of the ethical. Karma is ubiquitous; interdependence is endless. Responsibility, as HH the Dalai Lama constantly reminds, can only be universal.

3. Virtue, Consequence and Obligation

We can now see that Buddhist moral theory is neither purely consequentialist nor purely areteic nor purely deontological. Elements of each kind of evaluation are present, but there is no overarching concern for a unified form of moral assessment. And none of these is thematized as the focus of moral assessment. Rather, as I emphasized at the outset, the concern of Buddhist reflection on ethics is the solution of a fundamental, pervasive problem, the problem of suffering. The problem is complex, its roots are complex, and so its solution can be expected to be complex.

Suffering is both caused and constituted by fundamental states of character, including pre-eminently egocentric attraction, egocentric aversion and confusion

regarding the nature of reality. Hence the cultivation of virtues that undermine these vices is morally desirable. Suffering is perpetuated by our intentions, acts and their consequences. Hence attention to all of these is necessary for its eradication. Our own happiness and suffering are intimately bound up with that of others. Hence we are responsible for other and obligated to take their interests into account.

This is not to say that Buddhist ethics is simply an amalgamation of Aristotle, Mill and Kant into an incoherent jumble. Instead it represents a distinct moral framework addressed to problem-solving that takes action not to issue from a free will bound by laws, but from a dependently originated, conditioned continuum of causally interdependent psychophysical processes. It takes the relevant consequences of action not to be pleasure and pain conceived of as introspectible experiences of persons, but to be states of sentient continua of genuine suffering, that which conduces to suffering, genuine liberation, or that which conduces to genuine liberation, whether or not those are desired or detested, or experienced as desirable or detestable by the sentient beings imputed on the basis of those continua.

When we put this complex account of the moral status and dimensions of evaluation of action together with the tripartite theory of action and the tripartite distinction between kinds of action, we see that there is little sense in taking the action-centered component of Buddhist moral theory to be either a species of deontological or a species of consequential ethics as these appear in the tradition of Western ethics, although there are genuine kinships to each. The relevant categories of assessment, and the relevant considerations in deliberation are unified by distinct overarching vision of the complexity of ethical life, by a distinct overarching vision of the purpose of moral reflection and of moral cultivation and by a distinct overarching vision of the nature of agency and of the nature of life. If we fail to attend to this framework we see a patchwork. When we attend to the framework, we see a unitary, alternative way of taking up with ethics.

Finally, Buddhist moral theory takes the relevant virtues to be cultivated to be those that conduce to the alleviation of suffering. The adumbration of those virtues begins in the Pali literature, but it is addressed most completely in the Mahāyāna tradition, as developed in texts such as Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*and Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatāra*. We now turn to an examination of Buddhist moral psychology as developed in this tradition.

4. The Bodhisattva path and Buddhist Moral Psychology

As I have been emphasizing, Buddhist ethics is directed at solving the problem of suffering in the context of the nexus of dependent origination. Careful attention to the nature of suffering and its causes in this context reveals that the causes and effects of any one sentient being's suffering include the states of indefinitely many other sentient beings, and that there is nothing special about the suffering of any particular sentient being that gives it pride of place in moral consideration. Together these drive one to a universal concern for the enlightened welfare of all sentient beings and to the cultivation of states of character that reflect this awareness and commitment. Let us take these points in turn, and then consider the relevant range of virtues as adumbrated in Buddhist moral psychology.

First, it is an important fact about human beings in particular, but more generally about any beings with sufficient sentience to have moral standing that their cognitive, affective and motivational states are linked inextricably with those of indefinitely many others in a vast causal nexus. For present purposes, let us focus on the case of those social animals we know as *Homo sapiens.* Our happiness, suffering amd moral progress depends at all times on the actions and attitudes of others, as well as on their welfare. If others cooperate and support our projects and our development, success is far more likely; if their attitudes are hostile, happiness and progress are difficult to obtain. If we know of others' weal or woe, we are either

motivated to celebrate of to regret. Celebration of others' welfare benefits both ourselves and others; *Schaudenfreude* is not only detrimental to those around us but ultimately, through undermining the relations that sustain us, to ourselves as well. Similarly, our own actions, mental, verbal and physical have endless ramifications both for our own affective and moral well-being and for that of those around us. These are natural facts and to ignore them is to ignore the nature of action and its relevance to our moral, psychological and social lives.

Confusion regarding the nature of reality in the moral realm manifests itself most directly in the grasping of oneself and of that which most immediately pertains to oneself as having special importance and justifiable motivational force. In the Buddhist literature this is referred to as the two-fold self-grasping involving the grasping of 'I' and "being-mine," and issues directly in the moral duality of self and other. Such a duality leads to the distinction between prudential and moral concern, self-regarding and other-regarding acts and between those to whom one owes special regard and those to whom one does not, all taken by Buddhist philosophers to be spurious, and in general to a view of the world as comprising me, et al., a view not rationally sustainable once one sees that it is equally available, and so equally unjustifiable, for any moral subject. It is for this reason, at bottom, that confusion is a root moral delusion, and not simply an epistemological problem.

In the Mahāyāna, moral attention is focused on the cultivation of a set of perfections, or virtues, including those of generosity, patience, propriety, attention, meditation and wisdom. Once again, this list might seem odd to the Western ethicist, in virtue of the inclusion of such *prima facie* non-moral virtues as those of attention, meditation and wisdom on the same list as generosity, patience and propriety. Once again, though, attention to the focus of Buddhist ethics on solving the problem of suffering, and attention to the role of inattention, failure to develop the insights and traits of character cultivated in meditation, and ignorance as causes of and maintainers of suffering should dispel this sense of oddness.

It is also important to recognize that while one signal conceptual innovation in the Mahāyāna movement is the overlay of this distinctively aretaic conception of moral development on the framework of the eightfold path with its delineation of areas of concern, and on the account of the nature of action and karma familiar from earlier Buddhism, this is not an abandonment of the more basic framework, but an enrichment and a refocus. The eightfold path remains a central guide to the domains in which the perfections figure, and the perfections are manifested in the propensity to perform cognitive, verbal and physical actions of the kind assessable in the familiar framework of Buddhist action theory. The framework of the perfections hence only represents an approach to morality more focused on states of character than on their manifestations as the fundamental goals of moral practice.

The most important innovation in Mahāyāna moral theory, however, is not the framework of the perfections but the installation of compassion as the central moral value and the model of the bodhisattva's compassionate engagement with the world as the moral ideal. The compassion at issue is not a passive emotional response, and not a mere desire. That is sloppy sympathy, and benefits nobody. Instead it is a genuine commitment manifested in thought, speech and physical action to act for the welfare of all sentient beings. It is in this most sophisticated flowering of Buddhist ethics, with the anticipations of such moral theorists as Hume and Schopenhauer that Buddhist moral theory makes its closest contact with Western ethics.

Compassion in this tradition is founded upon the insight that suffering is bad, per se, regardless of whose it is. To fail to take another's suffering seriously as a motivation for action is itself a form of suffering and is irrational. This is a deep insight, and one over which we should not pass too quickly: the bodhisattva path is motivated in part by the realization that not to experience the suffering of others as one's own and not to take the welfare of others as one's own is to suffer even more deeply from a profound existential alienation born of a failure to appreciate one's own situation as a

member of an interdependent community. Our joys are social joys; our sorrows are social sorrows; our identity is a social identity; the bounds of our society are indefinite. We either suffer and rejoice together in the recognition of our bonds to one another, or we languish in self-imposed solitary confinement, afflicted both by the cell we construct, and by the ignorance that motivates its construction.

Compassion, grounded in the awareness of our joint participation in global life, hence is the wellspring of the motivation for the development of all perfections, and the most reliable motivation for morally decent actions. Compassion is also, on this view, the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the emptiness and interdependence of all sentient beings. Once on sees oneself as nonsubstantial and existing only in interdependence, and once one sees that the happiness and suffering of all sentient beings is entirely causally conditioned, the only rational attitude one can adopt to others is a compassionate one.

Compassion requires one to develop upāya, or skillful means, in order to realize one's objectives. Compassionate intention is only genuine if it involves a commitment to action and to the successful completion of action, enabled by the skills requisite for that action. A desire to eradicate world hunger is not genuinely compassionate in this sense if it leads nowhere. But moving to eradicate world hunger requires that one know how to act, if only to know to which organizations to donate, let alone to help others to grow or distribute food. It is in the domain of upāya that Buddhist and Western ethics converge in practice and it is in this domain that each can learn from the other.

Often the best way to ensure that minimal human needs are met, for instance, is to establish rights to basic goods, and to enshrine those rights in collective moral and political practice. Often the best way to ensure that human dignity is respected is to enshrine values that treat persons as individual bearers of value. Often the best way to ensure plenty is to develop social welfare policies. And often the best way to develop flourishing citizens is to articulate a theory of virtue. Western moral

theorists have been good at this. Liberal democratic theory and a framework of human rights has been a very effective device for the reduction of suffering, though hardly perfect or unproblematic. So has utilitarian social welfare theory. And virtue theories have been useful in moral education. These Western articulations of the right, the good and the decent provide a great deal of specific help in the pursuit of the bodhisattva path.

On the other hand, Buddhist moral theory provides a larger context in which to set these moral programs, and one perhaps more consonant with a plausible metaphysics of personhood and action, and with the genuine complexity of our moral lives. To the extent that that world is characterized by omnipresent suffering, and to the extent that that is a real problem, perhaps the fundamental problem for a morally concerned being, Buddhist moral theory may provide the best way to conceptualize that problem *in toto.* But Buddhist moral theory and Western moral theory can meet profitably when we ask *how* to solve that problem in concrete human circumstances, and it is in these concrete human circumstances that we must solve it.