

ENGAGING BUDDHISM

Why It Matters to Philosophy

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1. Introduction: The Subject Matter of Ethics

Contemporary normative ethics is dominated by debates between deontologists, consequentialists of various stripes and areteic ethicists with varying degrees of allegiance to Aristotle, with a few anti-realists thrown in. That is, moral theorists are debating the subject matter of ethics. Does it concern our obligations and rights? Or is it concerned with the preconditions of happiness or human flourishing? With the maximization of good and the minimization of harm? Or perhaps with our feelings and dispositions? Or is there perhaps no subject matter at all? Of course despite all of this theoretical debate, there is a great deal of common ground between divergent ethical theories regarding the moral valence of most states of affairs, maxims of action and traits of character. We can fruitfully see these debates, and, as we shall see, the Buddhist intervention into these debates, as a kind of generalization of the *Euthyphro* problem: Are deontological maxims good because they maximize utility, or the other way around? Are virtues good because they conduce to the discharge of duty, or the other way around? In short, what, if anything, grounds moral value? I will argue that Buddhist moral theory enters this debate not through disagreements about the value of happiness, virtue or duty, but rather by arguing that these values depend on a more fundamental value: our phenomenological orientation toward the world.

It is important when approaching Buddhist moral theory to resist the temptation to assimilate Buddhist ethics to some system of Western ethics. Succumbing to this temptation usually results in portraying it either as some form of utilitarianism (Goodman 2008) or virtue ethics (Keown 2005). 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, states of character and 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. So, while in many chapters of this volume I have argued for significant homologies or overlap between Buddhist and Western ideas, here I will be suggesting a dramatically different way of addressing important philosophical problems.

Buddhist moral theory provides an alternative voice to those in contemporary debates, and a different view of the subject matter of ethics. Buddhist moral theorists see ethics as concerned not *primarily* with actions, their consequences, obligations, sentiments or human happiness, but rather with the nature of our *experience*. That is, as we will see, Buddhist ethics is a *moral phenomenology* concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world, and hence our overall comportment to it.

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.¹ 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-samutpāda*. 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 *Jewel Rosary of Advice to the King*, Candrakīrti in *Introduction to the Middle Way*, and Śāntideva in *How to Lead an Awakened Life*. In particular, I will be ignoring a rich lode of moral literature comprised by the *Jātaka* tales and the vast corpus of Buddhist morality tales that populate Buddhist literature, offering a range of moral examples, ideals and cases for consideration (Rotman 2008).

1. There is hence reason to think of Buddhist ethical thought as *particularist* in certain respects.

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. 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. The discussion that follows will be grounded in Buddhist ethical texts and discussions, and sometimes on oral commentary to which I have been privy. But it will also involve a certain amount of rational reconstruction extrapolating from those texts and commentaries. Often the Buddhist tradition is not as explicit as one would expect on topics in ethics (Hayes 2011) and reflection and reconstruction is often necessary; indeed it is often a central task of oral teaching in this tradition.

2. Ethics and Interdependence

Thinking about the good from a Buddhist perspective begins from the first principle of Buddhist metaphysics—the fact of thoroughgoing interdependence. As we have seen, from a Buddhist perspective, every event and every phenomenon is causally and constitutively dependent upon countless other events and phenomena; and it, 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 taken to structure ethical deliberation and acting on egoistic motives regarded as at least *prima facie* rational, if not morally defensible or ultimately rational.

Buddhist accounts of identity reflect the commitment to interdependence. The boundaries 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, duty and desert are

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. (See Garfield 2010/11, 2012.)

Nāgārjuna argues 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 *dukkha* and the causes of *dukkha*. As we saw in chapter 1, 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, from a Buddhist perspective, moral discourse has no 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. Once again, the Buddha took it as a datum that people don't like *dukkha*, and Buddhist ethics is aimed at its relief.

The Buddha then argued that *dukkha* 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 *dukkha* is represented in the familiar Buddhist representation of the Wheel of Life with the pig, snake and rooster at the hub representing primal confusion, aversion and attraction, respectively; 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 *dukkha* are each regarded as moral defilements, and are not seen as especially heterogeneous in character. None of them is seen as especially problematic in most Western moral theory, and indeed each of the first two—attachment and aversion—is valorized in at least some contexts in some systems, particularly that of Aristotle, who characterizes virtues in part in terms of that to which we are attracted and averse.

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 the problem of *dukkha*;

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 *dukkha*. The diagnosis of the cause of the problem sets the agenda for its solution.

The third truth articulated at Sarnath is that, because *dukkha* 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 it 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 action, 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.² 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 *dukkha* 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, what we intend to do determines who or what we become. The great 5th-century Theravāda philosopher Buddhaghosa in *The Path of Purification (Visuddhimagga)* explores the role of intention (*cetanā*) in great detail, as do his slightly older, but roughly contemporary Mahāyāna

2. This is not, of course, to say that none of these views were held by important Buddhist scholars or that they were not prevalent in Buddhist cultures.

colleagues Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, in *Encyclopedia of the Abhidharma* and *Investigation of the Five Aggregates (Pañcaskandhaprakaraṇa)*, respectively. It is worth spending some time on this term and its role in Buddhist psychology and moral psychology at this point, as *cetanā* constitutes an important focus of Buddhist thinking about agency and morality in all major Buddhist traditions.

The term, as we noted above, is perhaps best translated as *intention* (or, as Meyers 2010 prefers, *intending*). Its semantic range is roughly consistent with that of *intention* in English, connoting *directedness* in its various forms. So it can indicate the purposive intentionality of action, the directedness of perception on an object or of thought on its content. So right in the eightfold path, we have an emphasis not only on what we intend to *do*, but on what we think *about*, and under what descriptions we think about and act on the world around us. And Buddhaghosa and Asaṅga explicitly draw our attention to the relationship between *cetanā* and our orientation to objects and persons around us as pleasant or unpleasant, allies or enemies, or in terms of other such categories, all orientations with moral as well as cognitive dimensions.

It is also worth considering, as we note the centrality of intention in this complex sense to Buddhist moral psychology, the ways in which the ascription of intentionality is always a matter of interpretation, even when that is self-ascription, or self-interpretation. And given the embeddedness of the practice of interpretation in narratives, as the backgrounds against which we make sense of action, we would expect an important narrative dimension to Buddhist moral thought, a dimension we will in fact discover. We will return to the role of *cetanā* and other *prima facie* simply cognitive attitudes, but, in a Buddhist framework, deeply ethical dimensions of experience below.

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 own life (as well as those of others), 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 tend 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.³ Instead, there is a broad indication of the complexity of the solution to the problem of suffering.

3. 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, as Tsongkhapa makes clear (2006, 355) 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 sequelae 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, as we would say in more contemporary language, the *immediate consequence*) or the final state of affairs resulting directly from the action itself. If I intend to give ten dollars to Oxfam and hand over the ten dollars to an Oxfam 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

3. The trope of "self and other" as in "for the benefit of self and others" is common in Buddhist literature. But this expression does not inscribe but undermines the distinction in question. The point is *not* that self and other are to be treated differently, but that they are to be treated in the same way.

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 reconciliation, 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 naive.⁴

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. Behaving in wholesome ways can be habit forming; so can behaving viciously. 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 characterize a particular action as good or evil *simpliciter* in this framework, nor can we enumerate our obligations or permissions. Instead we examine 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, on this model, as the Dalai Lama XIV constantly reminds his audiences, can only be universal.

4. Once again, this is not to say that nobody in any Buddhist culture has thought this way, and indeed a good deal of folk morality in Buddhist societies proceeds in just such a manner.

4. Beyond Virtue, Consequence Obligation: Toward Moral Perception

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 *dukkha*. 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 preeminently 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, our acts and their consequences. Hence attention to all of these is necessary for its eradication. Because our own happiness and suffering are intimately bound up with that of others, we are responsible for others and obligated to take their interests into account.

Buddhism hence 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.

The relevant categories of assessment, and the relevant considerations in deliberation, are unified by an overarching vision of the complexity of ethical life, by an overarching vision of the purpose of moral reflection and of moral cultivation, and by an 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 of ad hoc admonitions and assessments. When we attend to the framework, we see a unitary, alternative way of taking up with ethics.

Buddhist ethical thought is articulated with considerable care both in Pāli literature—preeminently by Buddhaghosa and his commentators—and in the Mahāyāna tradition, as developed in texts such as *How to Lead an Awakened Life* and *Introduction to the Middle Way*. There are important

differences in emphasis in these two bodies of literature, but they are more complementary than competitive, and together offer a rich view of moral psychology that can contribute a great deal to Western approaches to moral theory.⁵

Central to each is an account of perception grounded in Abhidharma psychology, a framework devoted to the detailed anatomy of the psychology of experience expressed in a set of lists of kinds of mental episodes, processes and factors together with an account of the ways in which fundamental sub-personal mental phenomena combine to yield the relatively macroscopic cognitive and affective states of which we are aware. There is not space in this volume to scout that terrain in full. For present purposes, it is important to note that there are several fundamental processes taken to be involved in all perceptual awareness, referred to as the *sarvaga/kun 'dro (kundro)* (*constantly operative*) mental factors.

We have already encountered one of these—*cetanā*, or intention, and have considered its role in perception and in moral consciousness in a preliminary way. To this we add *sparsa/reg pa (rekpa)* (*contact*), *vedanā/tshor ba (tsorwa)* (*feeling or hedonic tone*), *samjñā/'du shes (dusheh)* (*ascertainment*) and *chanda/'dun pa (dönpa)* (*action selection*). On this model of the perceptual process, perception involves not only bare sensory contact, but also intentionality, an initial sense of the sensory and affective valence of the object (pleasant or unpleasant; to be approached or avoided; friend or foe...), a cognitive ascertainment or determination of what the object is (perception is always perception-as, but on this model, not only as a thing of a kind, but as a thing with an affective valence) and all of this readies action with respect to the object.

What does all of this have to do with ethics? Everything. Each of our perceptual encounters, whether with other people or with the animate and inanimate objects around us, involves hedonic or affective tone. We may find ourselves averse to people who don't look like us or attracted to objects that lend us status, for instance. And every morally charged interaction begins with perceptual encounter. These affective sets are neither morally neutral nor fixed. Changing the affective dimensions of our perceptual experience is both possible, and can lead us to be better (or worse) people, can lead us to experience and to create more or less suffering. This is part of the work of ethical development.

5. The idea that moral evaluation is so multidimensional is not, of course, unique to Buddhism. See Feltz and Cokely (2013) for evidence that it is in fact part and parcel of our intuitive moral framework.

We have already encountered the moral dimensions of *cetanā*, of intentionality. The way we direct our attention, the categories in terms of which we perceive, that which grabs our attention are all matters of moral concern, but are all matters not of what we do *after* perception, but condition and direct our perception of the world. Nonetheless, while intention drives much perceptual processing, it is not an autonomous foreign force in our experiential lives, but rather a force we can come to control, and which can either take us in morally salutary or deleterious directions. Once again, moral development is seen to consist in the cultivation of essentially perceptual skills.

When we engage perceptually, we categorize. We see others as colleagues, adversaries, friends, family members, or strangers, superiors or subordinates, white, black, male, female, and so forth. And of course often these categories are far from morally neutral, and their moral valence may vary considerably with context. But perception is impossible without ascertainment of this kind. And once again, this ascertainment process is one that while present in any moment as a kind of perceptual reflex, is also malleable. We develop skills of ascertainment constantly in daily life, as when we learn to recognize kinds of flowers, genres of art, or the work of particular composers. But we can also hone our skills in moral ascertainment. Indeed, we used to have a term for this—*consciousness raising*.

Finally, part of perception is the readying of action. Our motor systems are fully integrated with perception, and this can be the basis of thoughtless reflex action, as when we strike out in anger upon perceiving a threat or an insult, flinch when we hear something uncomfortable, or reach out spontaneously in embrace. Once again, this aspect of our perceptual engagement with the world, while automatic in the moment, is malleable, and while deeply cognitive is also deeply moral. As we cultivate ourselves ethically, we develop the motor sets that are part of our spontaneous perceptual engagement with the world around us. (See Heim 2013 for a detailed discussion of Buddhaghosa's account of the structure of perception and of its moral dimensions.)

Ethical engagement, on this Buddhist view, has its foundation in perceptual engagement, and perceptual engagement on this view is far from passive, far from fixed. The project of leading a life that is a solution to, rather than a reinforcement of, the problem of universal suffering is at least in large part the project of reordering our perceptual engagement with the world. This is a very different orientation from one focused on action, duty or even the cultivation of a broad set of action-based virtues. Let us now see how this orientation to moral engagement through perception and our mode of experiencing the world articulates in the two great living Buddhist ethical traditions—that of the Theravāda and that of the Mahāyāna.