BUDDHIST ETHICS
Reconciling Virtue and Happiness

Damien Keown

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This book is designed to introduce readers to contemporary issues and debates in the field of Buddhist ethics. It does this by stimulating a dialogue between Buddhism and Western ethics on the topic of well-being. The Four Noble Truths present us with a conundrum: is nirvana a state of virtue attained by following the Eightfold Path, or a state of happiness defined as freedom from suffering? If both, how are they related? Drawing on Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, the view advanced is that worldly goods of the kind gained through merit (*puñña*) have been undervalued by the orthodox tradition. Practitioners have been encouraged to eschew merit (*puñña*) and cultivate virtue (*kusala*) as if the two were antithetical. The failure to recognise that they form an inseparable and complementary pair and together constitute nirvanic well-being has caused problems of understanding from ancient times. Alternative conceptions of well-being proposed by consequentialist interpreters are considered, as are related subjects of contemporary interest like Engaged Buddhism and Human Rights. While the focus is on Theravāda Buddhism the discussion is broadly based, and many of the topics considered transcend the boundaries of sect and school.

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Damien Keown

Centre of Buddhist Studies
The University of Hong Kong
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What is to prevent us, then, from concluding that the happy person is the one who, adequately furnished with external goods, engages in activities in accordance with complete virtue?
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

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Abbreviations

A	*Aṭṭhakathā*
AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Asl	*Atthasālinī*
BCA	*Bodhicaryāvatāra*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
EE	Eudemian Ethics
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
Kv	*Kathāvatthu*
Kh	*Khuddaka-Pāṭha*
Miln	*Milinda Pañha*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
NE	Nicomachean Ethics
PS	*Papañcasūdanī*
PTS	Pali Text Society
PTSD	Pali-English Dictionary of the Pali Text Society
Skt	Sanskrit
Sn	*Suttanipāta*
Sv	*Sumaṅgalavilāsinī*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Vin	*Vinaya*
Vsm	*Visuddhimagga*

Citations refer to the Pali Text Society editions of works supplemented by page references to the Wisdom Publications series of English translations. Thus, a citation in the form (DN i.47:91) is to *Dīgha Nikāya* volume 1, page 47 of the Pali Text Society edition of the text, the English translation of which can be found on page 91 of the Wisdom Publications volume *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*. Most translations are from the Wisdom Publications series. A citation in the form (DN 31) refers to *sutta* number 31 of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

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Introduction

This book is intended to accompany a course on Buddhist ethics. To facilitate its use as a course text each chapter is preceded by an overview of the contents and concludes with a summary of the conclusions. Important points are highlighted in text boxes and definitions of key terms are provided in bold type. Frequent use is made of tables and figures to assist comprehension, and footnotes have been kept to a minimum. At the end of each chapter there are suggested questions for class discussion or use as essay titles at the tutor's discretion. Each chapter also contains a 'Further Reading' section directing the student to relevant bibliographic material. One item in every list is marked with an asterisk to indicate its importance: if the student has time to read only one item, it should be this. Finally, a Glossary of ethical terms and concepts is provided at the end.

The aim of the book is to introduce the student to contemporary issues and debates in the field of Buddhist ethics. It is not an introduction to Buddhism and assumes a familiarity with the literature and teachings of the religion. The focus is on Theravāda Buddhism partly for reasons of space but mainly because this is where the author's expertise lies. While an introduction to Mahāyāna ethics is certainly desirable it would require a different set of skills and would best be treated in a separate volume. The book therefore draws mainly on Pali sources and uses Pali terminology. The author apologises to readers with a background in Mahāyāna Buddhism who may be more familiar with Sanskrit terminology. However, the Mahāyāna is not entirely ignored. Mahāyāna ethical innovations are described in the introduction to Buddhist moral teachings in Chapter 2, and our discussion of Engaged Buddhism (Chapter 11) and Human Rights (Chapter 12) is broadly based. Many of the issues that will concern us transcend the boundaries of sect and school.

Just as this book is not an introduction to Buddhism, neither is it an introduction to ethics. It is assumed that the student has some familiarity with the vocabulary of philosophical ethics. If not, there are many good introductions available, such as *The Fundamentals of Ethics* by Russ Shafer-Landau (2017). It will also be helpful if the student has perused Christopher

Gowans *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2015) before starting the course.

The following chapters attempt to stimulate a dialogue between Buddhism and ethics by seeking a Buddhist response to problems that have arisen in Western ethical debates. Accordingly, we will often interrogate Buddhist sources by posing questions that have been formulated by philosophers in the Western tradition. Examples of such questions are mentioned in Chapter 1, such as whether virtue by itself is sufficient for happiness and whether all the virtues are one. Reflection on questions of this kind helps us get a clearer understanding of the ethical principles that animate the Buddha's teachings. Perhaps we will even glimpse the bedrock upon which the edifice of Buddhist ethics rests (as we will see, not all commentators believe any such bedrock exists).

The primary focus of the book, then, is *metaethics*. We will be concerned mainly with conceptual clarification and the resolution of theoretical problems. This includes elucidating the relationship between the various teachings and doctrines which, like interwoven threads, make up the fabric of Buddhist ethics. We will seek to clarify the meaning of key ethical terms like *sīla*, *kusala*, *puñña*, and nirvana. Except for Chapter 2, we will not be concerned to expound the Buddha's ethical teachings. There are already books that do this, such as the Venerable Saddhatissa's classic volume *Buddhist Ethics*, first published in 1970. Nor is this a work of *applied* ethics, and our purpose is not to develop normative positions on ecology, war, social justice, medical ethics, or similar topics. Readers seeking an introduction to such topics are advised to consult the second edition of my *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Keown 2020).

In previous publications the author has developed an interpretation of Buddhist ethics inspired by Aristotelian virtue ethics, and while every effort has been made to present the subject in an objective manner this reading will no doubt consciously or otherwise have shaped the presentation that follows. The student should understand that all contemporary interpretations of Buddhist ethics are controversial and there is no agreement on many points. It seems right, therefore, to make clear that this book adopts an interpretation which at times will differ both from traditional views and the position of contemporary scholars. The student will be introduced to ongoing debates from the perspective of a participant rather than a detached observer. Hopefully, this will make the journey more interesting. Below I provide an outline of the general direction of travel and indicate where the positions adopted diverge from more familiar ones.

1 The Buddhist Path

In 1964, in the first edition of a book that launched the subject of Buddhist ethics, Winston King posed the question, 'Does Buddhism have one, or two, moralities?' (King 2001, 196). His answer, based on his observations of Theravāda practice in Burma, was that there are two. The first is 'worldly' (*lokiya*) and the second 'supramundane' (*lokuttara*). The first denotes the ethics of ordinary people, mostly laity, who keep the precepts but who have not been instructed in the higher teachings. They practice generosity (*dāna*) and morality (*sīla*) with the expectation of gaining merit (*puñña*) and attaining a good rebirth. The second corresponds to the ethics of advanced practitioners, mainly monks, who study the higher doctrines to attain the wisdom (*paññā*) that will free them from rebirth. In terms of this twofold model we can see that a gap has opened between morality-merit on the one hand, and wisdom on the other.

The Theravāda, or at least its scholastic wing, adds a third form of ethics proper to a specific class of moral agent. This is the adept (*asekha*) or saint (*arahant*) who has reached the end of the Path. In the view of Theravāda commentators these liberated beings have a special moral status that sets them apart from other practitioners. Their distinctiveness lies in their supposedly unique psychology, specifically in the fact that their 'mental formations' (*saṅkhāra*) are neither morally good nor bad, but instead merely 'functional' (*kiriya*). This means that unlike the volitions of other human beings the volitions of the adept have no karmic results.

A central theme of this book is that the threefold ethical scheme just described is a departure from the teachings of the *Nikāyas*. Our working assumption is that there are not three forms of Buddhist ethical practice, nor two, but only one. All practitioners, including the Buddha himself, can be located at some point on the same continuum. We will suggest that the moral psychology of the *arahant* is distinctive only in the sense that the *arahant* always acts virtuously and wills the good. Like any other person, *arahants* produce volitions that are *kusala* and experience the resultant karmic rewards known as *puñña*. It would be unusual – perhaps even unjust – if this were not so. This conclusion is perhaps surprising but, we believe, justified by the evidence.

Puñña has long been painted in a negative light and unfairly blamed as the agent of rebirth. The Path, accordingly, has come to be understood as geared to the progressive purging of *puñña* to the point where it is eradicated by the *arahant*. In this framework, it is *puñña* that marks the boundary between the three forms of ethical practice just described. *Puñña* separates the mundane

from the supramundane form of practice, and it is *puñña* again (or rather its absence) that demarcates the state of moral transcendence imputed to the adept. The adept is thought to free himself from rebirth by escaping the clutches of *puñña*, and in so doing, some believe, transcends moral norms.

The tripartite model of Buddhist ethics depicts *puñña* as an obstacle to be overcome. The practitioner is encouraged to eschew merit (*puñña*) and cultivate virtue (*kusala*) as if the two were antithetical. The failure to recognise that virtue and merit are an inseparable and complementary pair has caused problems of interpretation from ancient times and continues to plague commentators. If we think of Buddhist ethics as a jigsaw puzzle, *puñña* is the crucial piece that must be slotted into place for the picture to make sense.

2 The Buddhist Goal

The fact that there is only one path does not mean that the goal is unitary. In fact, it is a composite goal, because in following the path one develops virtues of two kinds. One is moral and encompasses virtues of character (like generosity or patience); the other is epistemic and encompasses virtues of the mind (like understanding or insight). The Buddhist names for these two classes of virtue are *sīla* and *paññā*. The Buddhist Path is a programme for achieving excellence in both, and the state of well-being finally attained is known as 'nirvana'.

Nirvana is thus a composite state. But is there anything more to nirvana than the two forms of virtue just described? The orthodox answer is there is not. We find, however, disagreements and ambiguities in the sources. These centre again on the problematic role of *puñña*, and it will be suggested that the orthodox concept of nirvana as exclusively a state of virtue must be leveraged to make space for *puñña*. Virtue is, of course, the primary form of human excellence, but *puñña* is also a human good. *Puñña* is valued because human beings are not discarnate spirits but embodied beings who live communally. They have material and social needs, and the human goods that *puñña* makes available – things like health, wealth, pleasure, beauty, and friendship – are important to their well-being.

The worldly goods just described are referred to in Western ethical literature as 'prudential goods' or 'welfare' (I will use these terms synonymously). Without these goods our happiness is lessened, and if nirvana represents a condition of supreme well-being, as we are given to understand, it cannot exclude prudential goods. What we might describe as the central problem

Figure 1: Three nirvanic values
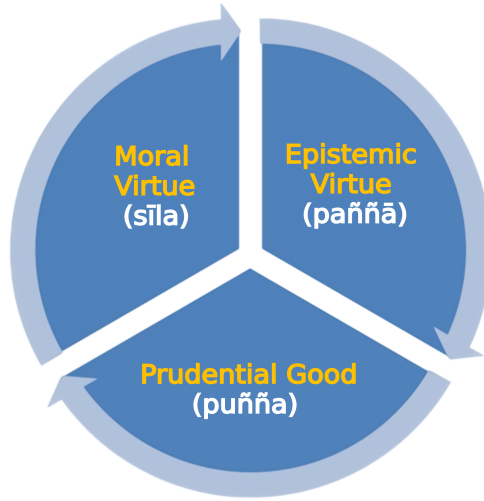
of Buddhist ethics is to understand the relationship between these worldly goods and virtue (or as this pairing is commonly expressed in Buddhist terminology, between *puñña* and *kusala*). More precisely, the challenge is to understand the relationship between the three values shown in the accompanying diagram (Figure 1) and their role in well-being.

The circle represents nirvana, and the relationship between the two forms of virtue (shown occupying the upper part of the circle) and prudential good (shown occupying the lower part) reflects a fault line visible in the most basic of doctrines. The Four Noble Truths mutely pose a vital question: Is nirvana valued as a state of virtue achieved by following the Eightfold Path, or as a state of welfare defined by freedom from suffering (*dukkha*)? One or other must be foundational. The position adopted here is that virtue is primary, but that worldly happiness is also valued. For this reason, the book is subtitled 'reconciling virtue and happiness'.

3 Chapter Outline

The preceding paragraphs provide a highly compressed account of our aims and approach. In the chapters that follow we will explore at greater length the axiological puzzle illustrated in Figure 1 along with many related questions. Some of these will concern the nature of our subject and its relationship to Western ethics. This will receive attention in Chapter 1, which will also

provide a preview of questions to be addressed in later chapters. Chapter 2 provides an overview of Buddhist moral teachings. Much of this material will be familiar to students of Buddhism but is formulated in a way that forges a connection with what follows. Chapter 3 introduces the principal Western theories of ethics and considers similarities and differences with Buddhist ethics.

In Chapter 4 we embark on an examination of *sīla* both as a moral precept and as a component (*khandha*) of the Eightfold Path. The following chapter, Chapter 5, examines worldly well-being and its constituent elements, while Chapter 6 does the same in relation to nirvana. In Chapter 7 we focus on *kusala* and *puñña*, terms that have given rise to conflicting interpretations in the scholarly literature. Students may find this chapter difficult, but in many respects, it is the heart of the volume and merits close attention. In Chapter 8 we turn to a recurrent theme in Buddhist ethics, namely that the awakened person passes 'beyond good and evil'. The idea that there is a form of transcendent ethical practice has its origin in scholastic sources but appears in various guises.

The last third of the book is concerned for the most part with Western developments. Chapters 9 and 10 are devoted to the two Western theories of ethics that seem to have the greatest resemblance to Buddhism. Chapter 9 explores Eudaimonism in its Aristotelian formulation, and Chapter 10 considers scholarly attempts to portray Buddhism as a form of Consequentialism. The final two Chapters (11 and 12) are devoted to Engaged Buddhism and Human Rights.

In sum, our twin aims are to explain Buddhist ethics emically by examining the internal consistency of its teachings, and to interpret those teachings etically using concepts developed by Western theorists. The task is a challenging one since Buddhism and ethics are both complex fields. In addition, there are methodological problems that could derail our enquiry. We will be led at times to conclusions that seem incompatible with received ideas, or what is commonly taught. The measure of success will be whether by the end the reader feels her horizons have been expanded and new perspectives have come into view.

1 Ethics East and West

1 In this Chapter

In this chapter we enquire what is meant by 'Buddhist ethics.' We consider whether this is a new subject, or the continuation of a discipline originated by Buddhist thinkers. In addressing this question, a distinction is made between Buddhist moral *teachings* and Buddhist moral *philosophy*. We will see that moral philosophy is primarily a Western discipline and we briefly review its origins and aims. The Western origins of the discipline give rise to methodological questions concerning the legitimacy of applying the terms and concepts of one culture to another. Such questions will occupy us in the first half of the chapter. The second half speculates as to reasons for the absence of a discipline of moral philosophy in Buddhism. The discussion anticipates various issues that will be addressed later in the book.

In the following chapters we will examine Buddhist ethics from two perspectives. One will focus on issues internal to Buddhist teachings, such as the meaning of specific terms and concepts. The other looks at the teachings from the outside, through the lens of Western theories of ethics. At various points, these perspectives intersect, and we will find that the clarification of certain terms and concepts inclines us towards a particular theoretical interpretation of the data. Before we begin our enquiry proper, however, we need to get a clearer sense of the nature and scope of the subject and consider some preliminary questions about how we intend to approach it.

2 'Buddhism' and 'Ethics'

An obvious preliminary question is: what exactly do we mean by 'Buddhist ethics'? The phrase seems straightforward enough but each of these words can be problematic. 'Buddhist' denotes things pertaining to the religion

(can we call it a 'religion'?) founded by the Buddha. Some scholars find this term too broad because they see schools like Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna dispersed across the Asian continent each with their own literatures and distinctive customs and practices. The erotic imagery and colourful rituals of the Vajrayāna, for example, seem alien to the sober spirit of the Theravāda.

We also find conflicting ethical tendencies within individual schools. For example, we read in some Mahāyāna sources that a good bodhisattva never breaks the precepts, while others tell us that bodhisattvas should break the precepts when compassion requires it. Furthermore, it appears there is one Buddhism for monks and another for layfolk, such that while monks have nirvana as their goal, the laity seek worldly happiness and a good rebirth. Discrepancies of this kind suggest that Buddhist ethics is far from univocal.

And what should we understand by *ethics*? Etymologically, 'ethics' comes from the Greek word *ethos* meaning 'character.' Today one use of the term is to denote a branch of philosophy, like logic or metaphysics. It can also refer to the moral standards applicable to some profession, as when we speak about 'business ethics' or 'medical ethics.' More broadly, it can refer to moral conduct in general, as when we describe certain behaviour as 'unethical'. To complicate matters further, 'ethics' is often used interchangeably with another term – 'morality'. This word comes not from Greek but from the Latin *mores* meaning customary behaviour or manners.

Clearly, the terminology can be confusing. One way to simplify things is to divide the subject matter of Buddhist ethics into two categories, distinguishing between Buddhist moral *teachings*, and Buddhist moral *philosophy*. By moral *teachings* we mean the advice and guidance the Buddha provided in his sermons. This generally goes under the name of *sīla* and includes rules like the Five Precepts. These moral teachings inculcate personal standards of a high order and are admired the world over.

> By moral *teachings* is meant the moral guidance the Buddha provided in his sermons. By moral *philosophy* is meant the critical analysis of those teachings with the aim of clarifying their central concepts, principles, and values.

By moral *philosophy* is meant the systematic and critical analysis of moral teachings in order to clarify their central concepts, principles and values. We will make use of this distinction to structure the next two chapters of the book. It will also be used in this chapter to explore an initial puzzle

concerning the nature of our subject. This is that while we find abundant moral *teachings* in Buddhism, the subject of moral *philosophy* does not appear to be well represented, as the following brief overview of the early literature will illustrate.

Sutta Piṭaka

In the Sutta Piṭaka the Buddha teaches that morality is part of the Eightfold Path that leads to nirvana; sets out codes of conduct such as the Five Precepts; defends the belief in karma against those who reject it; encourages the cultivation of virtues like non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), loving-kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*); and gives specific guidance to the laity in discourses like the Sigalovāda Sutta. We will describe these moral teachings in more detail in the next chapter. When giving these teachings, however, the Buddha rarely pauses to explore problematic scenarios that can arise. These take the form of moral dilemmas or ethical conundrums. To take a famous example from Kant, if lying is wrong (against the fourth precept) how should one respond to the madman who knocks on the door, axe in hand, and asks where his victim is hiding? Should you tell the truth and reveal that the terrified victim is hiding behind the door, or break the precept against lying in the hope of saving the victim's life?

Apart from moral dilemmas, very few thorny political questions arise of the kind put to other religious teachers. Jesus, for example, was questioned on whether it was right to pay taxes to the Romans, then an occupying colonial power (Rom. 13:6). The Buddha was rarely put on the spot in this way. At one point he himself poses an interesting rhetorical question about whether it is possible for a king to rule by Dhamma. He asks: 'Is it possible to exercise rulership without killing or causing others to kill, without conquering or causing others to conquer, without sorrowing or causing others sorrow—righteously?' (SN i.116:209). This is an important political question, but no answer is given, and the subject is abruptly changed leaving the question hanging in the air.

Vinaya Piṭaka

Turning to the Vinaya Piṭaka, tricky questions sometimes arise when applying the code of monastic law to particular cases. An example comes to mind under the third precept, which prohibits the taking of human life (the third *pārājika*). In this case a monk throws himself off a high place intending to commit suicide but instead lands on top of a basket maker who is killed

as a result (Vin iii.81). The juridical question raised by this unfortunate scenario is whether an incomplete suicide in which a third party is killed unintentionally constitutes a breach of the third precept (the verdict is it does not). The casuistry developed in resolving such cases, however, was limited to the needs of the monastic community.

Abhidhamma Piṭaka

Certain Abhidharma texts have a bearing on ethical matters. The first book of the Abhidhamma Piṭaka, the Dhammasaṅgaṇi, clearly attaches importance to ethics because it structures its taxonomy of mental states using a threefold classification into morally good (*kusala*), morally bad (*akusala*), and morally indeterminate (*avyākata*). It then lists further permutations in an attempt to provide an exhaustive classification of states of consciousness. Ethics, however, features here as a subdivision of psychology rather than an independent field of enquiry.

The same is true of later scholastic treatises. Buddhaghosa's fifth-century discussion of *sīla* in the Visuddhimagga lists the various forms and classifications of monastic deportment and etiquette but without attempting to explore basic ethical presuppositions. The space devoted to '*Sīla*' in this treatise represents only some seven percent of the work, the rest being devoted to '*Samādhi*' and '*Paññā*'. It would seem from this that Buddhist scholastics esteemed theoretical knowledge over moral conduct.

> Where should we look for discussion of moral philosophy in Theravāda literature? In the Pali canon or in scholastic treatises like the Visuddhimagga? Perhaps more popular literature like the Jātakas or Milinda's Questions will also contain relevant material.

Popular Literature

Problematic situations often arise in popular literature such as chronicles, folk tales, and fables. Sometimes the moral of a story is clear and needs no further clarification, but often the conclusion leaves us wondering. For example, was Vessantara right to give away his wife and children as described in the Jātaka tale? (Jātaka 547). His gesture seems an extraordinary one, so perhaps there is something special about the circumstances of his case. If so, what? Can we draw any conclusions from what Vessantara did, or formulate a rule about when it is right to give away wives and children? Is

this behaviour something we should copy? And why is it, as Egge asks, that 'stories of what may seem like immoral and insane acts committed against self and family appeal to Theravādin audiences'? (Egge 2015, 103). These are the kinds of questions we would expect moral philosophy to address.

Milinda's Questions

One early text reminds us of the kind of ethical debate we are familiar with in Western literature. This is Milinda's Questions, a third-century BCE work which purportedly records a debate between the Buddhist monk Nāgasena, who may have been an Indo-Greek monk of Gandhāra, and the Bactrian king Milinda, or Menander (Halkias 2014, 91). One cannot help contrasting the quizzical adversarial style of this text, in which Milinda plays the role of Socratic gadfly, with the general avoidance of controversy in the Buddha's own discourses. It is difficult to resist the impression that the format of Milinda's Questions owes a good deal to Greek influence on the Bactrian region of Northwest India colonized by Alexander the Great. We will return to the place of ethics in Greek thought below.

To conclude this brief review of the early literature, we can say that while we find abundant moral *teachings* in the Buddhist literary corpus, we do not find an attempt to engage in reflection on these teachings from a philosophical perspective or to enshrine moral philosophy as an independent field of enquiry in the Buddhist academic curriculum. There is a contrast here with the West, and it seems important to ask why the two cultures differ in this respect.

History

Perhaps history can give us a clue. Universities began to appear in Europe from the eleventh century, and ethics was studied in faculties of theology. A towering figure in the field of medieval ethics was the Dominican monk St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). The writings of Aristotle had recently reached Europe and Aristotle's ethical and other writings sparked considerable interest on the part of scholars. The novel *The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco (later made into a film starring Sean Connery) centres on a treatise by Aristotle and gives a flavour of the debates and controversies that the writings of this 'heathen' author gave rise to among Christian scholars. Aristotle's insights were adapted by Aquinas for a Christian context and his work provides a good example of how ethical ideas can be repackaged to meet the needs of new audiences. By the high medieval period ethics had

become an integral part of the university curriculum in the West. Go around any humanities library today and you will find many books on ethics in a clearly identified section of the philosophy area. 'Ethics' even has its own number – 170 – in the Dewey system of library classification.

What was the experience in ancient India? The foundation of universities in India pre-dates those in the West by a thousand years or so. The Jātakas speak of the Buddha as a bodhisattva mastering all branches of learning in the famous university of Taxila, and the Lalitavistara praises Gautama for his proficiency in eighty-six disciplines of the humanities and sciences. Ancient India had many great monastic universities, among them Nālandā, Somapuri, and Valabhī, and there were other prestigious institutions elsewhere, like the Mahāvihāra and Abhayagiri monasteries in Sri Lanka.

What subjects would have been studied in the classrooms at Nālandā, where the 10,000 students and 1,500 tutors reputedly assembled for their 100 lectures per day? Most likely the core syllabus would have featured the *pañca-vidyā* or 'five sciences,' namely grammar (*śabda*), logic (*hetu*), Buddhist philosophy consisting of subjects such as Abhidharma, Prajñāpāramitā, and Mādhyamika (*adhyātma-cikitsā*), Vinaya, and secular arts and crafts such as medicine (*śilpakarmasthāna-vidyā*). These five subjects came to form the basis of the curriculum in Mahāyāna institutions, and while we find plenty of philosophy on the curriculum, in the form of theories about how we know things (epistemology) or the nature of reality (metaphysics), there appears to be nothing corresponding to ethics or moral philosophy.

Socratic Paradoxes

What kind of problems would have been studied in moral philosophy in the West? Among other things, the syllabus would likely have included discussion of the co-called 'Socratic paradoxes' in Plato's dialogues. In the *Euthyphro*, for example, Socrates asks whether piety is good because it pleases the gods, or whether it pleases the gods because it is good. This problem could be rephrased in Buddhist terms by inquiring whether certain acts are good because they produce good karma, or whether they produce good karma because they are good acts. Although clearly an important ethical question (you may wish to think about it yourself) the problem does not seem to have been posed or pondered in these terms by Buddhist thinkers.

In the *Euthyphro*, Socrates asks whether piety is good because it is pleasing to the gods, or whether it is pleasing to the gods because it is good. This problem could be rephrased in Buddhist terms by inquiring whether certain acts are good because they produce good karma, or whether they produce good karma because they are good.

Other problems raised by Socrates include whether virtue is a form of knowledge and wrongdoing the result of ignorance. How would Buddhism frame this question? Perhaps it might ask whether moral virtue (*sīla*) is a form of wisdom (*paññā*). It often seems to be assumed that it is. For example, it is often said once we know certain truths about the world, such as that all phenomena are interconnected as taught in the doctrine of dependent origination, we will act more compassionately to others. This assumes that compassion arises from wisdom. If this is true, does it follow that the only virtue we need is wisdom, and if we acquire wisdom, we automatically possess all the other virtues?

This was Plato's view, a view many thinkers in the Buddhist tradition appear to share. Some sources praise wisdom above all other virtues, for example, the 'Perfection of Wisdom' (Prajñāpāramitā) corpus of scriptures dating from the first century BCE. If this view is correct, it follows that wrongdoing is due to a lack of knowledge: thus, once we *know* certain things are wrong, we will never do them. However, I am sure we can all think of examples where we knew very well something was wrong but did it anyway (like telling a lie, perhaps). The Greeks called this phenomenon *akrasia*, or 'weakness of will,' and its existence seems to challenge the view that virtue is a form of knowledge. This in turn casts doubt on the thesis that wisdom is all we need to lead a morally good life.

Analogous dilemmas are thrown up in Buddhist literature, but there seems little interest in deducing general principles from them. Perhaps, as has been suggested, this is because Buddhism has an aversion to moral theories. Philosopher Christopher Gowans suggests that Buddhists simply felt that moral theory was 'neither necessary nor even important to living morally and attaining enlightenment, and so they saw no reason to develop such a moral theory' (Gowans 2017, 60). This may be so, but then we might expect some Buddhist thinker to tell us explicitly why moral theories are best avoided. An explanation seems called for, because the same aversion to theories does not seem present in other branches of knowledge where Buddhist authors produced outstanding works. Subjects like epistemology, logic, metaphysics,

psychology, grammar, and medicine are common to East and West and all make theoretical claims, so why is moral philosophy the odd man out?

> 'If we set up an ethics based on the primacy of Indian concepts and then proceeded to look for evidence of these concepts in Western ethics, we would soon conclude there was no such thing as Western ethics.'
> *-Ninian Smart*

Orientalism

At this point readers might feel I am being unfair to Buddhism. They might regard my remarks as evidence of 'cultural imperialism' and an example of the 'Orientalism' decried by Edward Said (Said 2003). Surely, it might be said, the West should not be the yardstick by which other cultures are measured? The British philosopher and student of world religions Ninian Smart made this point very well. He said that if we turned the tables around and set up an ethics based on the primacy of Indian concepts like *dharma, karma, svadharma, karuṇā*, and *nyāya* and then proceeded to look for evidence of these in Western ethics we would soon conclude there was no such thing as Western ethics (Bilimoria et al 2007, 20).

This is a fair point, and it would be foolish to reduce ethics to specific concepts and expect to find them reproduced universally. For this reason, it is better to think of ethics as a scholarly discourse or branch of learning. What would constitute evidence of an interest in moral philosophy are not so much particular Western concepts – like Kant's 'categorical imperative' or Mill's 'principle of utility' – as indigenous solutions to problems these concepts were invented to solve, namely how to ground our moral obligations to others and pursue happiness in morally appropriate ways. These problems are as real for Buddhists as anyone else.

We can see that Buddhism is concerned about others from its moral teachings, but what remains obscure is the philosophical foundation and justification for those concerns. This may take the form of theories of the kind found in the West or indigenous conceptual paradigms, but either way there is a substantive issue here for the moral philosopher to grapple with. Charles Goodman makes a helpful suggestion, which is that rather than conceiving our project in terms of the imposition on Buddhism of theories invented by Westerners, we should think of it as drawing up a chair at the table for indigenous thinkers like Śāntideva and inviting learned Buddhist doctors like him to give us, through the legacy of their writings, their views on Western

theories so that we can find a better way forward together (Goodman 2009, 72).

> Rather than conceiving our project as the imposition of Western theories on Buddhism, we can think of it as an invitation to Buddhist thinkers to give us, through their writings, their opinion on Western ethics.

No doubt some readers will already have thought of Buddhist thinkers or texts that address issues falling under the rubric of moral philosophy. Śāntideva, whom I just referred to, is one likely candidate, and no doubt there are others dotted around the landscape of Buddhist history, particularly in East Asia. Here I would say only that while such examples may be found, they never came to constitute a school, lineage, tradition, or body of thought within which individuals understood themselves as standing collectively as moral philosophers in the manner of other specialists in their respective domains, such as *vinayadharas* or specialists in monastic law.

3 Reasons for the absence of Ethics

If what has been suggested so far is correct, and the subject of moral philosophy is not found in Buddhism, what might be the explanation? It is too soon to be sure where the answer lies, but we can map out possible lines of inquiry. Six possible reasons are shown in the text box and we will discuss each in turn.

> **Reasons for the absence of ethics**
> 1. Missing texts
> 2. Different distribution of knowledge
> 3. Practice over theory
> 4. Metaphysics
> 5. Sociology
> 6. Indian Philosophy

Missing Texts

Perhaps the simplest explanation for the apparent lacuna in Buddhist intellectual life is that it is not a genuine gap, merely a temporary one waiting to be filled by the discovery of relevant manuscripts. This suggestion, which

we touched on earlier, derives its plausibility from the voluminous nature of Buddhist texts in various languages and the fact that only a small percentage has been translated. Perhaps, then, discussions of topics like virtue and justice simply await discovery.

In his classic volume *Buddhist Ethics*, Saddhatissa suggested the possibility that texts may have been lost in the political turbulence of the early period as smaller kingdoms were swallowed up by the expanding state of Magadha. He writes: 'In this building up of a Magadha empire it was inevitable that Buddhist interests should have been adversely affected, and it seems hardly strange that the earliest Buddhist scriptures, whether they were ever written down or not, should have disappeared as a collection' (Saddhatissa 1987, 148). He admits, however, that 'we have no indication that amongst these earlier works there was ever included a formal treatise of the nature of Plato's Republic' (Saddhatissa 1987, 149).

The hypothesis of missing texts is unlikely to be correct since manuscripts on all matter of topics have come to light and it would be curious if only treatises on moral philosophy had been lost. When we reviewed the main rubrics of early literature, we did not identify any area where the subject was addressed, nor do later scholars like Buddhaghosa seem to have taken much interest in it. Medieval texts in which we might hope to find evidence that the subject had evolved for the most part repeat familiar moral teachings. Given the absence of moral philosophy from the Buddhist curriculum, it seems more likely the material was never composed.

Distribution of Knowledge

A second explanation might suggest that knowledge is distributed in different ways in different cultures and that while we may not find moral philosophy represented as an independent discipline, ethical concerns will nevertheless be addressed under some other rubric. There is some truth in this and, as already mentioned, the fables and stories we find in popular literature embody ethical reflection to some degree. These stories provide practical examples of the wise and foolish choices people make (often using animals anthropomorphically as in the Jātaka tales), and each story contains a 'moral' of some kind.

Such stories reveal the importance of wisdom in practical affairs, a virtue Aristotle called *phronesis*. Some scholars believe that the 'Buddhist ethics' we are searching for is embodied in these stories rather than in ethical treatises. We note, however, that the Greeks also had a rich literature of legends, myths and stories, but Greek philosophers used them as a starting

point for the discussion of ethical conundrums and the development of comprehensive theories about the nature of the good life.

The story of the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* is an example of one such transition from fable to moral philosophy. The story tells how Gyges, a simple shepherd, obtained a magic ring that made him invisible. He took advantage of this power to kill the king and take over his kingdom. The question the story raises concerns the nature of justice, and specifically whether there is any reason to be just beyond the fear of getting caught. The view proposed is that people are basically self-interested, and if they had the same power as Gyges they would be justified in acting in the same self-interested way.

> The story of the ring of Gyges in the *Republic* tells how Gyges, a simple shepherd, obtained a magic ring that made him invisible. Being invisible, he could do anything he wanted without being apprehended. He took advantage of this power to kill the king and take over his kingdom.

When Plato examines the story from a philosophical perspective, however, he rejects this view. He says that justice is an important virtue and human beings can only find fulfilment in their lives if they act justly. If we act unjustly, in his opinion, we harm not only others but ourselves. Indeed, he makes the surprising claim that it would be preferable to *suffer* injustice than perpetrate it. For this reason, Plato says, we should not let ourselves be seduced by advantages like riches and power, as was Gyges. Thus, from the events narrated in a story familiar to all Greeks, Plato reasons to an ethical conclusion about the priority of virtue over welfare.

Politics

While discussing the Greeks, a point to add is that although we are concerned with ethics, the hiatus in the Buddhist curriculum extends to what Aristotle calls 'the philosophy of human affairs,' or political science. In his ethical writings Aristotle tried to bring out what virtue consists of and how it is attained by the individual. At the same time, he also believed that the opportunities to become good, and to help others become good, were located predominantly in the wider political community or state.

For Aristotle, as for Plato, the state is above all a large and powerful educative agency that gives the individual increased opportunities for self-

development and greater capacities for the enjoyment of life. Both philoso-
phers believed humans are social beings and can only flourish in communi-
ties. Accordingly, these thinkers saw a need to explore questions concerning
the organization of society and to reflect on the laws and institutions that
would secure and facilitate the development of good character. Here, there is
a contrast with Buddhism, as Saddhatissa observes:

> It might have been expected that, with the attention given to the
> conduct of the laity and the frequency of his advice in social
> matters, the Buddha would at some time have sketched the
> political construction of an ideal state: yet no thought of any
> reform in the existing political set-up is apparent. ... It seems
> that he attributed the success of a system to the morals of the
> people working it rather than to any virtue inherent in the system
> itself. (Saddhatissa 1987, 135)

Winston King notes that 'Buddhism took the monarchical form of secular
society that it found in India for granted and was not concerned enough to
worry about changing it.' He accepts that 'there are some passages dealing
with the duties of kings' but observes 'significantly most of these are found
in the *Jātaka Tales*, not in the classic *suttas*' (King 2001, 164). The result,
King adds, is that Buddhism 'has scarcely moved consciously toward social
or political definition until very recently' (King 2001, 167).

Aristotle, as noted, saw the relationship between individual and state as
interdependent, and understood ethics as a subdivision of politics. For this
reason, in Greek literature of roughly the same period as the Pāli canon
we find authors composing treatises in which three interwoven themes—
politics, justice, and ethics—are repeatedly taken up and explored. As King
puts it, 'the West has been theorizing and experimenting in sociopolitical
matters, both in a secular and religious way, ever since the days of Plato'
(King 2001, 163). King here alludes to the role of religion, and mention
must be made of the influence of Christianity in taking the Greek interest
in justice in a social direction in defence of the poor and oppressed. The
Jewish and Christian god is commonly portrayed as a god of justice and
righteousness.

The concept of justice, so pivotal in Western ethics and politics, does
not figure prominently in Buddhist philosophical thinking. We can see it
implicitly in descriptions of the ideal ruler or *Cakkavatti*, who, we are told
rules 'righteously and fairly' (*dhammena samena*). Later treatises in the
nītiśāstra tradition which offer advice to kings also stress that a ruler should

be just. Justice also seems to underlie the workings of karma, the mechanism by which everyone sooner or later gets what he or she deserves. Buddhist doctrine, however, does not link suffering to social or political institutions. The Second Noble Truth, as we shall see, attributes the arising of suffering entirely to craving (*taṇhā*) and makes no mention of injustice. Whether Buddhism should pay more attention to social justice is a point we will return to in our discussion of Engaged Buddhism and Human Rights in the final two chapters.

> Buddhism does not seem to understand the arising of suffering as due in any significant way to social or political institutions. The Second Noble Truth attributes the arising suffering entirely to craving (*taṇhā*) (craving) and makes no mention of injustice.

Practice Over Theory

A third suggestion is that the urgency is for implementation rather than critique. The truth and the path have been revealed by the Buddha, so there is no longer any need for speculation. Furthermore, would it not be a kind of disrespect or lack of faith in the enlightened master to question the moral guidelines he laid down? Given the Buddhist emphasis on pragmatism, and since human life is short and the path is clear, energy is most profitably spent in proceeding along it as quickly as possible.

It is true that the Buddha's focus was ever on the practical and empirical, particularly the problem of human suffering and its resolution. In the famous parable of the man wounded by a poisoned arrow (MN i.429:534) he makes the point that the need is to remove the arrow and heal the wound rather than pursue a speculative inquiry into matters such as where the arrow came from. Winston King suggests this pragmatism derives from:

> [A] distrust of analytical principles as over against personal judgment, concept against intuitive judgment, and the abstract principle as opposed to the concrete situation. Whatever other elements there may be here, the net result is understandable: such soil is unfavorable to that type of systematic intellectual analysis of the Greek, and to some extent the Hindu, mind (King 2001, 104).

This attitude may have inclined Buddhism towards a 'Particularist' view of ethics and a preference for situational decision-making, a possibility we

will consider in Chapter 3. King describes this as a 'peace of mind' approach to ethical problems based on the assumption that 'the balanced mind, the calm, serene spirit will be able to do what is "right" in any situation.' In brief, 'The right-minded person decides rightly' (King 2001, 207).

However, the claim that practice is more important than theory is not unique to Buddhism, and other religions make the same point. This did not prevent them developing a discipline of moral philosophy. Take Christianity, for example. The fact that moral teachings have been revealed by a divine teacher in a tradition that stresses the transitory nature of human existence and the urgent need to seek salvation has never been a bar to the development of Christian moral philosophy. There have been university chairs in Christian ethics for many centuries, but there has never been a chair in Buddhist ethics in any university in the East or the West down to the present day.

To repeat an earlier point, the argument about the practical nature of Buddhist thought should not be pressed too far. Buddhism is an intellectually dynamic tradition, and from the earliest times there has been philosophical speculation on all kinds of matters, many of which have little connection with the practice of the Eightfold Path. One need only consult Abhidhamma discussions on the temporal duration of *dhammas* to see that this is the case. Ironically, in view of the Buddha's injunction to focus on practical matters, it was metaphysics that came to dominate the Buddhist intellectual landscape from the early centuries onward.

Metaphysics

Mention of metaphysics brings us to a fourth suggestion, namely that certain Buddhist teachings have hindered or undermined the development of ethics. Two teachings are associated with this claim: the doctrines of no-self (*anattā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Thus, it is sometimes said that the absence of a self entails the absence of moral agency, thereby undermining the basis for ethics. In other words, how can there be morality without a moral agent? And with respect to emptiness it is often claimed that since all phenomena are empty of self-essence, good and evil are ultimately 'not found,' so there is no foundation for moral values.

> Buddhist metaphysical teachings may have hindered or undermined the development of ethics. Two teachings are associated with this claim: the doctrines of no-self (*anattā*) and emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

This metaphysical critique links up with an idea mentioned earlier, namely that enlightened persons, such as Buddhas and *arahants*, transcend moral norms. The enlightened sage, it is often suggested, passes 'beyond good and evil,' so eliminating the need for ethics. If these sages do pass 'beyond good and evil' (a claim we will consider in Chapter 8) then there is indeed a sense in which ethics has only provisional value. This idea is usually connected to another notion we have already mentioned, namely that awakening is basically a matter of epistemology: in other words, what is important is what we *know*, rather than what we *do*. Once we know the truth, on this view, we have no need of conventional moral constraints and become morally autonomous. Intriguing though such speculations are, it seems unlikely they would have been sufficient to stifle an incipient interest in moral philosophy. Indeed, these very suggestions would have provided more grist for the ethical mill, had one existed.

Sociology

A fifth line of inquiry proceeds from Weber's thesis that Buddhism began as a renouncer tradition and so questions about the regulation of social life were never part of its agenda. Buddhism rejected the caste system and the tradition of religious law taught in Hindu *Dharmaśāstras*. Perhaps distaste for the complexity and inherent discrimination of this form of social organization steered Buddhism away from a concern with issues about the rights and duties of individuals in society. When rules became necessary for the conduct of monastic life it evolved its own regulations in the Vinaya, as we have seen.

This line of explanation is only partially persuasive, however, since Buddhism was never a movement consisting exclusively of renouncers and soon became woven into the fabric of local communities. At the same time, there is a sense in which the sociological separation between monk and laity may have created a gap in ethical aspirations. Thus, the high moral standards of the monk were an ideal a layman might aspire to but never realistically hope to attain.

The observation of anthropologists that the Buddhist laity is more concerned with merit-making than the observance of the precepts is relevant here. As S. J. Tambiah put it in his study of Thai spirit cults, 'Strict observance of the precepts has little positive interest for the villager . . . not because he devalues them but because they are not normally open to him.' Such concerns, he concluded, 'are thought to have pertinence primarily for

the monk and secondarily for the aged approaching death' (Tambiah 1975, 148).

Given a social context in which high moral ideals and the demands of daily life are separate, there is clearly less opportunity for moral dilemmas to arise. There is an obvious contrast here with religions like Christianity and Islam, in which religious or canon law has a direct bearing on social life and regularly presents challenges that need to be addressed. To take an example, the precept against taking life found in many religions appears to conflict with waging war, but whereas Christianity and Islam have developed theories of 'just war' in an attempt to reconcile theory and practice, Buddhism has not. Perhaps, then, the lay-monastic sociological division has blunted the perception of ethical conflicts to the point where they do not generate sufficient dissonance to call for intellectual resolution. The laity do not feel the force of the discrepancy because they assume that high moral ideals are not applicable to them, and monks are not exposed to the kinds of situations where such conflicts arise. The ideals live in one world and the realities in another, so no ethical traction is generated.

> The lay-monastic division may have blunted the perception of ethical conflicts to the point where they do not generate sufficient dissonance to call for intellectual resolution. The laity do not feel the force of the discrepancy because they assume that high moral ideals are not applicable to them, and monks are not so exposed to the kinds of situations where ethical conflicts typically arise.

Indian Philosophy

To broaden the context beyond Buddhism and introduce a sixth and final reason, it is noteworthy that Indian philosophy has shown little interest in ethical theory. Textbooks on Indian philosophy barely mention the subject. In this connection Bimal Matilal writes:

> Certainly, there exists a lacuna in the tradition of Indian philosophy. Professional philosophers of India over the last two thousand years have been consistently concerned with the problems of logic and epistemology, metaphysics and soteriology, and sometimes they have made very important contributions to the global heritage of philosophy. But except [for] some cursory

comments, and some insightful observations, the professional philosophers of India very seldom discussed what we call moral philosophy today. (quoted in Bilimoria et al 2007, 16)

It seems clear that the Indian philosophical tradition established no precedent for Buddhism to follow in the field of moral philosophy. Why would this be? Philosophers from Hegel onward have suggested that the explanation lies in the supposedly different mentalities or 'modes of thought' of East and West. Some Western thinkers have described Eastern thought as 'mythic' or 'mystical' in contrast to Western 'rationalism'. This seems an oversimplification since there are many examples of rational thought in the East and mythic thought in the West. The reason why Indian philosophers were not drawn to moral philosophy remains unclear. We can only speculate that they felt such matters were already adequately addressed in the lawbooks and *Dharmaśāstras*, or perhaps that ethical concerns were automatically resolved by the attainment of mystical knowledge.

4 Summary

To sum up, it would appear that the discipline of Buddhist ethics is a modern invention. The explanation for this is probably threefold. First, the absence of a precedent in Indian philosophy, which channelled intellectual curiosity towards either metaphysics or *Dharmaśāstra*. Second, in the West ethics was linked to the development of democracy while in India political authority remained predominantly in the hands of kings. Although democracy did not endure for more than a few centuries in ancient Greece, it was perhaps long enough to stimulate comparison with alternative political systems (such as the despotism of neighbouring Persia) and provoke debate on their respective merits.

The third, sociological, reason is that in Buddhism intellectual interest was focused on the needs of an elite community with a tightly controlled lifestyle – the *saṅgha* – which, while not as otherworldly as sometimes painted, initially had little interest in social or political affairs and did not see the resolution of ethico-political dilemmas as part of its job description. It is true that the concept of the *Cakkavatti*, or righteous ruler, provides a kind of placeholder for political theory, but this was not developed very far. Even the reign of the great Aśoka did little to stimulate interest in politics among Buddhist intellectuals. The Buddha's own policy, as followed subsequently by the *saṅgha*, seems to have been to achieve symbiosis with the political authorities and minimise friction.

Whatever the merits of these speculations, it seems clear that it is only since Buddhism arrived in the West that a nascent discipline of Buddhist ethics has been established. As mentioned, we can tentatively date its origin to 1964 and the first edition of *In the Hope of Nibbāna* by Winston King (King 2001). King had studied Buddhism in Burma, and perhaps it is no coincidence that he was also a Baptist minister.

Engaged Buddhism, like Buddhist ethics, also seems to have its origins in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and it can hardly be a coincidence that both arose around the same time. Without wishing to downplay the contribution of Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders, perhaps we can see Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist ethics as emerging from two branches of Western learning— politics and ethics— which never developed in Buddhism to the same degree but are now emerging as central concerns.

As we look to the future adaptation is occurring. In the words of Winston King the situation in which Buddhism now finds itself is 'somewhat similar to what occurred in Christianity when, as an other-worldly millennial gospel, it was adjusting itself to the task of creating a "Christian civilization"' (King 2001, 192f). Or, to choose an example from a later period, just as medieval Christian scholars incorporated the thought of Aristotle into Christianity, contemporary Buddhist leaders now have recourse to Western concepts such as human rights to express concern about global issues. Deciding how well this vocabulary expresses Buddhist ideals and values is a task that will face students in coming decades. Going forward, many Buddhists have an ambitious vision of Buddhism's missionary role in the modern world. There is a conviction, writes King, that:

> [O]ther philosophies, religions and moralities have all broken down and are incapable of prescribing for the world's ills. The West, says Buddhism, has turned away from its insufficient faiths to an aggressive, religionless materialism which is bound to destroy the world sooner or later. (King 2001, 208)

It is hard to disagree that many Westerners have become alienated from their religious traditions, and now seek spiritual meaning in Buddhism. It is to be hoped the study of Buddhist ethics will lend greater clarity and direction to their quest.

5 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- The term 'Buddhist ethics' can refer both to Buddhist moral *teachings* and Buddhism moral *philosophy*.
- There is doctrinal variety among Buddhist schools, but they have much in common as regards lay and monastic ethics.
- Buddhist moral teachings are found in disparate sources rather than in one literary corpus.
- Popular sources like Jātaka tales are a source of everyday wisdom but are not commonly used as the basis for reflective ethical analysis.
- Western ethical vocabulary may not correspond exactly with the terms and concepts found in Buddhist sources, and vice versa.
- There seem to be three main reasons why a discipline of moral philosophy did not evolve in Buddhism: i) the absence of any such discipline in Indian philosophy; ii) the absence of democracy in Asia; iii) the fact that monastic jurisprudence was dealt with separately in the Vinaya.

Discussion questions

1. Can we generalise about Buddhist ethics, or does each school have its own moral teachings? Give examples of differences among schools in relation to moral teachings.
2. Why do you think moral philosophy developed in the West but not in India?
3. Is it possible to understand Buddhist ethics through Western ethics? Give examples of Western ethical terms and concepts that have no direct Buddhist equivalent.
4. Is moral virtue (*sīla*) a form of wisdom (*paññā*)?
5. What can we learn from the story of the Ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic*?
6. Can we learn any moral lessons from the story of Vessantara? Should people imitate his conduct?
7. Are certain acts good because they produce good karma, or do they produce good karma because they are good acts?

Further Reading

- *Gowans C.W. *Buddhist moral philosophy: an introduction*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis; 2015. Introduction and Chapter 3, pp.54-57.
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- Saddhatissa, H. *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism*. New York, N.Y.: Wisdom Publications, 1987. Chapters 1 and 7.
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2 Buddhist Moral Teachings

1 In this Chapter

In the last chapter a distinction was made between Buddhist moral *teachings* and Buddhist moral *philosophy*. In this chapter we focus on the former. These teachings are often intertwined with other doctrines and it is not always easy to isolate the distinctively moral elements. We therefore begin with a general discussion of Dharma as natural foundation for Buddhist ethics before examining the Four Noble Truths. Next, we consider Buddhist virtues like generosity (*dāna*) and non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) before turning to the doctrine of karma. This is followed by a discussion of the ethical innovations introduced by Mahāyāna Buddhism, such as the bodhisattva ideal and the practice of skilful means (*upāya-kauśalya*). The moral teachings discussed here will provide the basis for our discussion of moral philosophy in the following chapter.

2 Dhamma

The ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics is Dhamma (or Dharma). Dhamma is a term with many meanings, but its most basic sense is of a principle of cosmic order. Every aspect of life is believed to be regulated by Dhamma, from the succession of the seasons to the norms that govern human societies. Dhamma is neither caused by nor under the control of a supreme being, and the gods themselves are subject to its ordinances, as was the Buddha (the Buddha claimed only to have discovered Dhamma, not to have invented it). Living in accordance with Dhamma and implementing its requirements with respect to law, custom, religion, and ethics is thought to lead to happiness and well-being; neglecting or transgressing it is said to lead to endless suffering in the cycle of rebirth known as *saṃsāra*.

'Dhamma' is also the name given to Buddhist teachings, since these are believed to faithfully reflect the way things are. In his first sermon, the Buddha was said to have 'turned the wheel of Dhamma' and in this discourse he set out the Four Noble Truths, the last of which is the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to nirvana. The Buddha was a systematic teacher and his Dharma is an integrated set of doctrines. This chapter therefore confines itself to providing an overview of the place of morality in the Dhamma. Specific discussion of *sīla* and the Buddhist precepts will be postponed to Chapter 4 for separate consideration.

Because of their shared belief in Dhamma, Buddhist schools share common moral teachings. While there are notable cultural differences, we find a broadly similar set of moral values. Perhaps the most striking exception to this pattern is Tantra, where, in restricted circumstances, conventional moral norms are set aside in the course of an esoteric religious training. Apart from exceptions of this kind, however, most lay Buddhists would take the Five Precepts as the basis of their moral practice, while Buddhist monks and nuns would regard the Vinaya as a binding code of conduct. In the Preface to his book *Buddhist Ethics*, the Venerable Saddhatissa speaks of 'ethical concepts accepted by all the schools of Buddhism' and notes 'there is no difference between these concepts among the different schools, either Theravāda or Mahāyāna' (Saddhatissa 1987, 7).

As is common in traditional societies, in India moral teachings are expressed in the form of duties rather than rights. These duties are often thought of as linked to a person's social status (such as the caste to which they belong) or their profession or occupation. Ultimately, however, all moral obligations have their foundation in Dhamma, and there are certain basic requirements that all must respect, regardless of social position or occupation. On becoming a Buddhist, the initiate participates in a ceremony known as 'going for refuge' in which he or she formally 'takes the precepts' – in other words, gives a voluntary undertaking to respect and observe them.

3 The Four Noble Truths

It is recorded that on the night of his awakening the Buddha apprehended the Four Noble Truths, and when he gave his first sermon in the deer park at Sarnath he made specific reference to them (DN ii.90:239). The Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*) form the cornerstone of Buddhist doctrine, and encapsulate the Buddha's understanding of the human predicament and its solution. The Four Truths are shown in the Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: *The Four Noble Truths*

The Four Noble Truths	
Truth	**Meaning**
1. *Dukkha*	Life is suffering
2. *Samudāya*	Suffering arises from craving
3. *Nirodha*	Suffering can have an end
4. *Magga*	The Noble Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of suffering

The Four Noble Truths provide a diagnosis and remedy for the 'sickness' that afflicts all sentient life. The Buddha was often compared to a physician, and his teachings to a medicine. The formulation of the Four Noble Truths (which some scholars believe was not developed until a later stage of the Buddha's teaching career) is like that of a medical examination: first, the condition is diagnosed; second, its cause is sought; third, the physician makes a prognosis for recovery; fourth and finally, a course of treatment is prescribed.

The First Noble Truth: Suffering

> **The First Noble Truth**
>
> This, monks, is the Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*). Birth is suffering, sickness is suffering, ageing is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness, and despair are suffering. Association with what one dislikes is suffering, being separated from what one likes is suffering. Not to get what one wants is suffering. In short, the five aggregates which are grasped at (*upādāna-kkhandha*) are suffering.

The word translated as 'suffering' in the above extract is *dukkha*. *Dukkha* is a term with a spectrum of meanings, all denoting circumstances or situations that are in some way unsatisfactory, or not as we would wish them to be. According to context, it can be translated as 'suffering', 'pain', 'ill', 'unsatisfactoriness', 'anguish', 'stress', 'unease', and a range of other synonyms. *Dukkha* is the opposite of *sukha*, which means 'pleasure', so one of its basic meanings is certainly 'pain'. But just as 'pain' can refer not just to physical but also to psychological or emotional distress as well as situations which are bothersome or inconvenient, so *dukkha* can also have a

more generalized range of meaning and a more nuanced translation is often required.

> Commentators distinguish three forms of suffering:
>
> 1. physical suffering (*dukkha-dukkha*)
> 2. suffering due to change (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*)
> 3. suffering due to the nature of the five aggregates (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*)

The various kinds of suffering identified above are classified by Buddhist commentators into three categories. The first of these is *dukkha-dukkha*, which we may translate as suffering 'plain and simple'. This includes all the examples of suffering due to biological causes (birth, sickness, ageing, death). Next comes *vipariṇāma-dukkha*, which means 'suffering due to change'. It is a basic tenet of Buddhist thought that everything that arises will cease – in other words, things are impermanent (*anicca*) and constantly changing. Given this fundamental instability we can never know what will come next, and so cannot guarantee that our happiness will endure.

Finally, the third aspect of suffering is '*dukkha* as formations' (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*). This kind of suffering arises because everything in *saṃsāra* is made up of component parts and will sooner or later be reduced to them. This applies to human beings as much as anything else, and this third aspect of suffering is what is referred to in the phrase the 'five aggregates which are grasped at'. This introduces a Buddhist doctrine known as *anattā*, or the 'no-self' teachings.

No-self

The teaching of the five aggregates (see text box) was expounded by the Buddha in his second sermon, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (Vin i.13), preached five days after the first. The Buddha here states that human nature is constituted by the five factors (*khandha*) much in the way that a chair is constituted by its legs, seat, back, and other parts. In stating that the five factors of individuality are suffering, the Buddha was pointing out that human nature cannot provide a foundation for permanent happiness because the individual has no real core. Because human beings are made up of five components it is inevitable that sooner or later suffering will arise, just as a chair will eventually fall apart. Suffering is thus engrained in the very fabric of our being.

> ### The Five Aggregates
>
> 1. Material form (*rūpa*)
> 2. Feelings and sensations (*vedanā*)
> 3. Perceptions (*saññā*)
> 4. Mental formations (*saṅkhāra*)
> 5. Consciousness (*viññāna*)

From an ethical point of view, the fourth category (*saṅkhāra*) is of particular interest. Here we find the tendencies, traits and habits that constitute the character of an individual. It is the specific configuration of these traits that defines people as the individuals they are. In the Abhidhamma, Buddhist commentators drew up long lists of mental factors in an attempt to exhaustively define the content of this category, which we have here called 'mental formations.' A central role is played by the will or volition (*cetanā*). This is the faculty by which we make moral choices, and it is through the exercise of volition that karma is produced. Retrospectively, the fourth category is the sum of the moral choices made in previous lives, and the people we become – our character – is the accumulated history of these choices.

> Retrospectively, the fourth category – 'mental formations' (*saṅkhāra*) – is the sum of the karma or moral choices made in previous lives. The people we become – or our character – is the accumulated history of these choices.

According to Buddhism, the human subject can be deconstructed into these five aggregates without remainder, and since the five make no reference to an eternal soul Buddhism is said to teach a doctrine of 'no soul' or 'no-self' (*anattā*). In terms of this doctrine, the common but fallacious belief in an eternal soul is a case of mistaken identity whereby one or more of the *khandhas* is mistaken for a self. So, in the doctrine of 'no-self' is the Buddha denying that individuals have a personality or a unique identity? Not at all. The ego is not denied by this teaching. If it were, it would make the moral life impossible and destroy the rationale for karma. The doctrine of *anattā* does not take anything away: it simply recognises that the concept of an eternal and unchanging soul is redundant and is not required to explain how human beings function. While the doctrine of no-self is not a moral teaching it has a bearing on moral practice insofar as it undermines the self-centred perspective from which we normally view the world.

The Second Noble Truth: Arising

If suffering is an inevitable part of life, how does it come about? The Second Noble Truth explains that the cause of suffering is craving (*taṇhā*). Just as with *dukkha*, we must be careful how we translate this word. It is quite common to translate *taṇhā* as 'desire', but this can lead to the mistaken idea that Buddhism sees all desire as wrong, and to the paradoxical conclusion that we must somehow seek an end to suffering without desiring it. This is psychologically impossible. Human behaviour without a goal is nothing more than a random series of movements. Desire is the emotional force that orientates us towards our goals and motivates us to attain them. For this reason, desire can have positive connotations, as when we speak of the desire of a scientist to conquer disease, or the desire of a bodhisattva to save all beings.

> ### The Second Noble Truth
>
> This, O Monks, is the Truth of the Arising of Suffering. It is this thirst or craving (*taṇhā*) which gives rise to rebirth, which is bound up with passionate delight and which seeks fresh pleasure now here and now there in the form of (1) thirst for sensual pleasure, (2) thirst for existence, and (3) thirst for non-existence.

A common cause of misunderstanding is that 'desire' can signify attraction towards both good and bad things. For example, one can desire to smoke cigarettes, to sit on the sofa and watch television all day, and to eat junk food. These are bad things. However, one can also desire to give up smoking, take exercise and eat healthy food. These are good things. The Pali word *taṇhā* is almost always associated with negative desires and addictions. For this reason, 'craving' is a better translation for *taṇhā*, since it reminds us that the Second Noble Truth refers to desire that is of an excessive, selfish, or morbid nature, and directed towards unwholesome ends. Whereas craving tends to be constraining and cyclic (like the desire for another cigarette), desire for wholesome things is liberating and enhancing. For example, the desire of a chain-smoker to give up cigarettes breaks a compulsive habit and enhances the health and quality of life of that person. Thus, we should distinguish between desire as *craving* and desire as *aspiration* (Segall 2020, 92). Alternatively, we might speak of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' desires (Morrison 2001, 105–9).

> 'Craving' is a better translation for *taṇhā* than 'desire' since it reminds us that the Second Noble Truth is referring to desire that is of an excessive, selfish, or morbid nature, and directed towards unwholesome objects or ends.

The Second Noble Truth refers to three forms of craving, and the first of these is craving for sensual pleasures (*kāma*). Sensual craving (*kāma*) is any kind of desire for gratification that comes by way of the senses, such as the desire to experience pleasurable sensations of touch, taste, smell, sight, or sound. Since Indian psychology includes the mind as one of the senses (thus counting six senses instead of the usual five), this also includes pleasurable fantasies and daydreams (MN i.51:138).

The second kind of craving refers to the desire for existence (*bhava*). This is a kind of instinctual urge, a deep yearning to be, which propels us from one life to another and brings us back again and again to seek new pleasures and experiences. The third aspect of craving is an inverted form of desire that drives us not towards things but away from what we do not like. This form of desire manifests itself in a negative way and seeks to destroy (*vibhava*) rather than possess. Such destructive desires can be directed towards both self and others. When directed towards the ego they take the form of self-harming behaviour, and, in extreme cases, suicide. They are typically seen in self-deprecatory remarks and other manifestations of low self-esteem in which people 'put themselves down'.

In the formulation of the Second Noble Truth *taṇhā* is picked out as the single cause of the arising of suffering. Elsewhere, however, the cause of suffering is said to be threefold in nature, consisting of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). Other formulations again, such as the doctrine of dependent origination, explain the arising of suffering by reference to a twelvefold chain that includes ignorance as its first link and craving as its eighth. Despite the different formulations, the root problem is a complex involving both cognitive error (such as ignorance or delusion), and inappropriate affective dispositions or emotional responses (such as excessive attachment or aversion). The problem, therefore, affects both head and heart, and needs to be addressed through a program of retraining or therapy which cultivates insight and understanding and replaces unwholesome attachment with wholesome aspirations.

The Third Noble Truth: Cessation

The Third Noble Truth is a corollary of the Second. If craving (*taṇhā*) is the cause of suffering (*dukkha*), it follows that once craving is removed, suffering will cease. This is exactly what the Third Noble Truth proclaims. This state of being free from suffering is known as 'nirvana' and this is the supreme goal of the Buddhist path. Nirvana literally means 'blowing out', in the way that the flame of a candle is blown out. What is blown out are the three 'fires' (also known as the 'three poisons') of greed, hatred, and delusion. For this reason, the simplest definition of nirvana is 'the end of greed, hatred, and delusion' (SN 38.1:1294). So long as these three 'fires' continue to burn, the individual will remain trapped in *saṃsāra*, going round and round in the wheel of rebirth.

> ### The Third Noble Truth
>
> This, O Monks, is the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering. It is the utter cessation of that craving (*taṇhā*), the withdrawal from it, the renouncing of it, the rejection of it, liberation from it, non-attachment to it

Someone who embarks on the Buddhist path seeks to reverse the process described in the first two Noble Truths through which craving leads to suffering. Over the course of many lifetimes, as the negative forces of craving and ignorance are slowly weakened through following Buddhist teachings, an individual begins to cultivate positive states of mind and undergoes a spiritual transformation in which virtuous qualities predominate over negative ones. Such individuals become empowered, growing stronger, freer, and happier as they leave behind negative states such as fear, doubt, worry and anxiety. Eventually they evolve into saints (*arahants*) who have developed their capacities beyond those of ordinary folk and attained a state of supreme happiness and well-being.

We are told both that the Buddha 'attained nirvana' while seated under the Bodhi tree at the age of thirty-five, and that he attained 'final' nirvana on his death at the age of eighty. It is important to distinguish these two kinds of nirvana. The first refers to the destruction of greed, hatred, and delusion by a living human being, and denotes an ethical and spiritual transformation. This is sometimes referred to as 'the extinction of the defilements' (*kilesa-parinibbāna*). Having attained this state, the Buddha lived on for forty-five years giving religious teachings. When he died at the age of eighty, he

entered the final nirvana referred to as 'the extinction of the aggregates' (*khandha-parinibbāṇa*).

The first kind of nirvana is relatively easy to understand. Here, we see a human being displaying qualities we recognise as exemplary. We see such qualities in heroes and role models. The second kind of nirvana, however, is problematic, for it is not clear what has happened to the Buddha once his mortal body has been left behind. We know the Buddha will not be reborn, but where has he gone? The Buddha said that it was like asking where a flame has gone once the candle is blown out. He was not keen for his followers to explore questions of this kind and discouraged speculation about matters he maintained could only be known through experience.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Path

The Fourth Noble Truth – that of the Path or Way (*magga*) – explains how suffering is to be ended and the transition from *saṃsāra* to nirvana is to be made. The Eightfold Path is known as the 'middle way' because it steers a course between a life of indulgence and one of harsh austerity. The Path consists of eight factors divided into the three 'trainings' of Morality (*sīla*), Meditation (*samādhi*), and Wisdom (*paññā*) (MN i.301:398). We see from this that morality is integral to the religious life, and since the sources usually speak of the three trainings in the same order, we can conclude that morality is the forerunner and prerequisite for the other two. This is because it is widely recognized that an immoral or undisciplined person will find it difficult to make spiritual progress. The traditional enumeration of the eight items, however, begins with Right View since one cannot meaningfully embark on the path without at least a preliminary understanding of the destination.

> ### The Fourth Noble Truth
>
> This, O Monks, is the Truth of the Path which leads to the cessation of suffering. It is this Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of (1) Right View, (2) Right Resolve, (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action, (5) Right Livelihood, (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness, (8) Right Meditation.

Let us describe the eight factors briefly.

1. Right View (*sammā diṭṭhi*) essentially means seeing and accepting the Four Noble Truths. A complete understanding is not envisaged in the preliminary stages, simply an initial acceptance of – and confidence or faith

(*saddhā*) in – the Buddha and his teachings. This initial confidence will be confirmed through personal experience over the course of time, and nothing needs to be believed purely as an article of faith. Right View is explained in the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta (MN 117) as at a minimum belief in the moral law of karma, respect for parents and religious teachers, and the possibility of personal spiritual progress.

2. Right Resolve (*sammā saṅkappa*) means developing right attitudes such as freedom from desires, friendliness, and compassion. It includes making a serious commitment to attaining a state of contentment and freedom from sensual desires (*kāma*), abandoning hatred (*avyapada*) and abstaining from causing any injury to others (*ahiṃsā*).

3. Right Speech (*sammā-vācā*) means not telling lies, avoiding 'divisive speech' (such as making remarks that can cause enmity between people), avoiding harsh speech (speech which is aggressive or hurtful to others), and frivolous talk (such as gossip and idle chatter).

4. Right Action (*sammā-kammanta*) means abstaining from wrongful conduct through the body such as killing, stealing, or behaving inappropriately with respect to sensual pleasures.

5. Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājivā*) means not engaging in an occupation which causes harm or suffering to others, whether human or animal. This involves being honest in one's business affairs and not cheating one's customers (MN iii.75:938). It also involves avoiding certain trades and professions that cause death or harm such as 'trade in weapons, living beings, meat, alcoholic drink, or poison' (AN iii.208:790).

6. Right Effort (*sammā vāyāma*) means developing one's mind in a wholesome way by practicing mindfulness and mental cultivation as in meditation. It involves slowly transforming one's mind by replacing negative thoughts with positive and wholesome ones.

7. Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*) means developing constant awareness in four areas: in relation to the body, one's feelings, one's mood or mental state, and one's thoughts. It also involves eliminating negative thought patterns such as the 'five hindrances' (*nīvaraṇa*), namely desire for sensual pleasure, ill-will, sloth and drowsiness, worry and agitation, and nagging doubts.

8. **Right Meditation** (*sammā-samādhi*) means developing mental clarity and calm by concentrating the mind through meditational exercises. By such practices, the practitioner can enter states like the four *jhānas*, the lucid trances which played such an important part in the Buddha's quest for awakening.

Figure 2.1: The three factors of the Eightfold Path
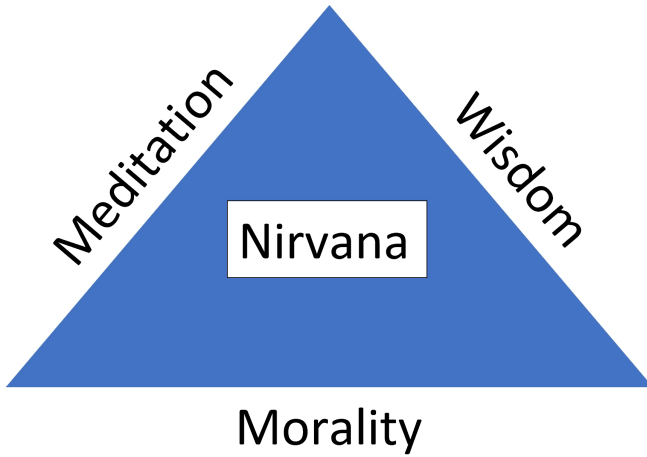
As noted, the eight factors of the Path fall into three areas, and these can be pictured as a triangle as shown in Figure 2.1. Morality (*sīla*) forms the baseline and is the foundation of religious practice since without self-discipline it is difficult to make progress in any endeavour. Meditation (*samādhi*) involves the development of the mind and the emotions through the practice of calming (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassanā*) meditation, while wisdom (*paññā*) concerns knowledge and understanding of the way things are. These three factors brace and support one another, and each is in constant contact with the other two. To put it another way, the three factors work together like a team. Thus, just as morality is the foundation for meditation and wisdom, it is also strengthened by them in turn, since inner calm and clear understanding produce a heightened moral sensibility which helps distinguish more clearly between right and wrong. Meditation boosts the intellectual faculties and makes wisdom stronger and more penetrating, and wisdom supports meditation by making clearer and more intelligible the experience of the meditative states. If we understand their interrelationship in this way, we can say that 'nirvana' is simply the name for the confluence of these three factors.

It is important to realize that the Noble Eightfold Path is not a series of stages one passes through on the way to nirvana, in the way that a traveller passes through various towns on the way to his destination. The eight factors are not objectives to be reached and then left behind; rather the Path is a continuous program of self-improvement in which the eight factors

are developed in conjunction. The Path is essentially a spiritual makeover which turns the unenlightened person into a Buddha. 'Accordingly,' writes Karunadasa, 'the highest level of moral perfection coincides to a great extent with the very path that leads toward it' (Karunadasa 2017, 99).

4 Virtues

We will discuss the various Buddhist precepts later (Chapter 4), but in addition to these external observances there is an internal dimension to moral practice which is also important. Buddhist teachings place great emphasis on the cultivation of good qualities known as virtues. These are exemplary habits, such as generosity and patience. These good habits become so integrated into the personality that those who possess them are almost incapable of acting in a contrary manner. To attain a state of such natural and spontaneous goodness is the goal of Buddhist moral teachings.

We have already mentioned the three most basic or 'cardinal' Buddhist virtues, namely non-greed (*arāga*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). From these three cardinal virtues are derived others, including generosity (*dāna*), non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), energy (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), and compassion (*karuṇā*). We will comment on the first two of these below, reserving 'compassion' for our discussion of the Mahāyāna. This is not to suggest that compassion is absent in early Buddhism and it is found as the second of the four *Brahma-vihāras*, the 'Divine Abidings' or 'Sublime States'. These are dispositions cultivated particularly in meditation, consisting of loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). The practice of these virtues involves radiating their qualities outwards, starting with oneself and then extending their scope to include family and friends, neighbours, the local community, and finally the entire world.

> The three most basic or 'cardinal' Buddhist virtues are non-greed (*arāga*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). From these cardinal virtues are derived others that are called upon in specific situations such as generosity (*dāna*), non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), renunciation (*nekkhamma*), energy (*viriya*), patience (*khanti*), and compassion (*karuṇā*).

Dāna

Dāna is related to the English word 'donor' which gives a good idea of its meaning. As we will see below, *dāna* is also the first of the 'Six Perfections' of a bodhisattva, and in an important sense marks the beginning of the religious path, a path on which a selfish person can make little progress. Those who join the monastic community give everything away as a condition of entry, and as religious teachers and exemplars give of their time in teaching and performing good works. In this respect they give 'the gift of the Dhamma', which is said to be the highest of all gifts.

In economic terms, *dāna* is a virtue which is of special importance to the laity since they provide everything the *saṅgha* needs, including robes, food, medicine, and the land and buildings for the monastery. The emphasis on generosity is widespread in Buddhist cultures, and stinginess or niggardliness is seen as a particularly negative quality. At all levels of society generous actions are praised and applauded, and a generous heart is thought to be a sign of spiritual maturity. This is because the generous person is less wrapped up in his or her egocentric concerns and is more alive to the needs of others. Renunciation and detachment come more easily to someone of a generous nature.

Buddhist literature provides many examples of heroic generosity. Earlier, we mentioned the story of Prince Vessantara, the hero of the Vessantara Jātaka (Collins 2016; Cone and Gombrich 1977). Vessantara was a prince who gave away his entire kingdom, then – as if this were not enough – proceeded to give away even his wife Maddī and their young children as slaves! Fortunately, the story has a happy ending because generous acts inevitably lead to good karmic consequences.

Heroic sacrifices are also made by bodhisattvas who give away limbs or sacrifice their entire bodies to save starving animals. A story in the Jātakamālā, a fourth-century collection of stories composed by Āryasūra, tells how the Buddha in a previous life threw himself off a cliff in order to feed a starving tigress, so moved was he by compassion for the suffering of the animal and her young cubs. In East Asia, the practice of burning off fingers or limbs arose as an act of sacrifice dedicated to the welfare of all sentient beings. In 1963 the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc burned himself alive as an act of political protest. Many Tibetan monks in China have followed his example in recent years. These deeds are seen by some as an extreme form of *dāna*, although opinion among Buddhists is divided as to the wisdom of such acts.

Ahiṃsā

Ahiṃsā is the virtue of non-violence or non-harming. In modern times it has been associated with Gandhi and his policy of non-violent protest against the British during the struggle for Indian independence. It is largely because of its emphasis on *ahiṃsā* that Buddhism is regarded as nonviolent and peace-loving. Although Buddhist countries have not been free from war and conflict there is a strong pressure to seek peaceful solutions to problems rather than using violent means.

The origins of *ahiṃsā* in ancient times seem to lie among the unorthodox *samaṇa* groups, although the principle increasingly came to influence the orthodox Brahmanical tradition. Jains and Buddhists rejected animal sacrifice as cruel and barbaric, and as a reaction to their criticism blood sacrifices began to be replaced by symbolic offerings such as fruit, vegetables, and milk. As a moral principle, *ahiṃsā* involves more than just opposition to animal sacrifices. Despite the negative formulation of the term ('non-harming') it has positive implications for how one behaves towards living creatures generally. It involves, for example, treating living creatures with kindness and respect born out of a concern for their well-being.

In ancient India, it was the Jains who followed *ahiṃsā* most strictly. They believed it was wrong to destroy any form of life, however small, and took precautions such as wearing masks to avoid breathing in tiny insects. Buddhist monks followed this example to some degree and were permitted to carry a water-strainer to remove tiny creatures from their drinking-water. They also refrained from traveling during the rainy season, partly because the rains brought forth innumerable species of insects which could be crushed underfoot by the traveller. Buddhism, however, took the view that *ahiṃsā* imposes the more limited obligation to refrain from the *intentional* taking of life: in other words, no bad karma results from accidentally treading on an ant, but if one does it deliberately with the intention of causing death or harm, it is a bad act. Buddhist texts place much emphasis on cultivating feelings of concern (*dayā*) and sympathy (*anukampā*) for living creatures, based on the realization that all dislike pain and suffering just as much as oneself (the 'Golden Rule').

> In contrast to the Jains, Buddhism takes the view that *ahiṃsā* imposes the more limited obligation to refrain only from the *intentional* taking of life.

Due to the importance of *ahiṃsā*, many Buddhists, and in particular followers of the Mahāyāna in East Asia, have embraced vegetarianism as a

way of life. The Buddha himself was not a vegetarian and did not require his followers to give up eating meat (in fact, he opposed an attempt to make vegetarianism compulsory for monks). Many Buddhists in South Asia are not vegetarian, although professions involved in the slaughter of animals (such as that of butcher) are looked down on.

5 Karma

In popular usage karma (or *kamma*) is thought of as the good and bad things that happen to a person, like good and bad luck. However, this oversimplifies what for Buddhists is a complex of interrelated ideas that embraces both ethics and belief in rebirth, and which is summed up in the term *saṃsāra* ('flowing on').

The doctrine of karma is concerned with the ethical implications of Dhamma and specifically with the consequences of moral actions. For Buddhism, karma is neither random – like luck – nor a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God. Nor is it destiny or fate (*niyati*): instead, it is best understood as a natural – if complex – sequence of causes and effects. In the Abhidhamma it goes by the name *kamma-niyāma* (Atthasālinī 2.360) and is classified as one of five natural orders (listed in Chapter 7), all of which are derivative applications of the universal law of causation known as dependent origination (*paṭicca-sammuppāda*).

The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is 'action', but karma as a religious concept is concerned only with actions of a particular kind. The Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated, 'It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind' (AN iii.415:963). The Buddha modified the traditional Brahminical understanding that viewed karma as the product of ritual sacrifice, and his view also differed from that of other heterodox teachers. In the Upāli Sutta (MN 56) the Buddha discusses with a follower of Jainism which of the three modes of actions – body, speech, or mind – is most reprehensible. The Jain states that bodily action has the greatest power to produce bad karma. The Buddha disagrees, stating that mental actions are the most potent of the three, thereby illustrating the innovative ethical perspective he adopted.

> The Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices
> and the acts consequent upon them. He stated, 'It is
> intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having
> willed one acts through body, speech, or mind.'

So how can we tell if an action is good or bad in terms of karma? From
the way the Buddha defined it the main criterion is intention. In Buddhist
psychology, as we noted earlier, there are said to be three basic kinds of mo-
tivation known as 'roots' that underlie intention (*cetanā*). Actions motivated
by greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) are bad (*akusala*) while
actions motivated by their opposites are good (*kusala*). What matters to a
Buddhist is to ensure that his or her motivation is always of a wholesome
kind, since this is the way that good karma is accumulated and progress to
nirvana is made.

Agriculture provides a common metaphor for karma, and creating karma
is likened to the planting of seeds. Some seeds are good, and some are bad,
and each bears sweet or bitter fruit at the appointed time. So it is with good
and bad deeds. The karmic choices we make today will come to 'maturation'
(*vipāka*) or bear 'fruit' (*phala*) in the future. Sometimes karma will bear fruit
in the same lifetime: an example is seen in the way the features of an angry
person become progressively distorted and ugly with time (MN 135).

Various aspects of the life to come are said to be karmically determined,
including the family into which one is born, one's caste or social standing,
physical appearance, character, and personality. Any karma accumulated but
not yet spent is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead.
In this sense individuals are said to be 'heirs' to their previous deeds (MN
iii.203:1053). The exact way karma operates, and the mechanism that links
acts and their consequences, is a matter of debate among Buddhist schools.
The Buddha simply described the process as profound, and as inconceivable
(*acinteyya*) to anyone except a Buddha.

> Karma is not the same as determinism. Determinism
> is the belief that everything that happens to a person
> is preordained and brought about by fate or destiny
> (*niyati*).

It is important to grasp that the doctrine of karma is not the same as deter-
minism. Determinism is the belief that everything that happens to a person is
preordained and brought about through fate or destiny (*niyati*). The Buddha
made a distinction between karma and deterministic fate and accepted that

random events and accidents can happen in life. Not everything need have a karmic cause, and events like catching a cold can simply be random. The Buddha disagreed with certain of his contemporaries who held the view that 'whatever good, bad, or neutral feeling is experienced, all that is due to some previous action', explaining that certain illnesses could be attributed to physical causes (the 'humours') rather than the effect of karma (SN iv.230: 1279). At the same time, the Buddha was emphatic that individuals are free moral agents and so responsible for their actions. He taught the importance of moral action (*kammavāda*) and of performing good deeds (*kiriyavāda*). In the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2) he severely criticised six of his contemporaries who taught that moral actions have no consequences, a doctrine known as *akiriyavāda*. While not rejecting Buddhist moral teachings, some contemporary Buddhists, known as 'Buddhist modernists' reject belief in karma and rebirth as incompatible with science. We will consider their views in Chapter 11.

Merit

Good karma is highly prized by Buddhists and is spoken of as 'merit' (*puñña*). Its opposite, bad karma, is referred to as 'demerit' or *pāpa*. A good deal of effort is put into acquiring the former and avoiding the latter. The purpose of acquiring merit is to enjoy happiness in this life and to secure a good rebirth, ideally in one of the heavens.

> If a person is motivated to do good deeds simply for personal gain, then the underlying motivation is greed, and accordingly the good deeds performed are not likely to generate merit.

A common way to earn merit, particularly for the laity, is by supporting and making offerings to the *saṅgha*. This can be done on a daily basis by placing food in the bowls of monks as they pass on their alms round; by providing robes at the annual *kaṭhina* ceremony held at the end of the rainy-season retreat; by listening to sermons and attending religious services; and by donating funds for the upkeep of monasteries and temples. Merit can even be made by congratulating other donors and empathetically rejoicing (*anumodana*) in their generosity.

Some Buddhists think of merit as a commodity, like money in a bank account which can be earned and spent (Schlieter 2013). A few go to the extreme of carrying a notebook in which they record their good and bad

deeds and total up their 'balance' every day. This materialistic conception of merit is not one the orthodox teachings would support since the motivation is selfish. If a person performs good deeds simply for personal gain, then the underlying motivation is greed, and accordingly not likely to generate much merit. Such behaviour misses the point that merit is produced as a by-product of doing what is right and should not be sought as an end. Merit is created by doing virtuous deeds, so it is virtue (*kusala*) rather than merit (*puñña*) that should be the motivation. We will have more to say about these terms and their relationship in Chapter 7.

Merit Transference

Many Buddhists believe that merit can be transferred from one person to another. Rituals and donations are often preceded by a dedication to the effect that any merit that arises from the act should go to a named recipient or group. This practice of 'merit transference' (*pattidāna*) has the happy result that instead of one's own karmic balance being depleted, as it would in the case of a financial donation, it increases as a result of the generous motivation in sharing. As we will see in Chapter 7, merit transference depends on a conception of merit (*puñña*) as a 'force of goodness,' and the assumption that this force can be channelled at will to other persons. An apparent flaw in the concept of merit transference is that if good karma can be channelled in this way, then why not bad karma? Redirecting one's bad karma would ensure a heavenly rebirth, and if it were possible everyone would do it. The answer, presumably, is that one can only transfer merit from a credit balance, but this stretches the financial metaphor to breaking point. While it can be pictured as a transferable commodity, it is doubtful whether merit can be manipulated and distributed quite so easily as the concept of 'merit transference' suggests.

6 Mahāyāna morality

The Mahāyāna was a major movement in the history of Buddhism that emerged around the start of the common era. While the Mahāyāna introduced new teachings, it is not a monolithic system, and there is no 'official' code of ethics for either laymen or monks. The Vinayas of the early schools were not rejected and continued to be observed by monks and nuns alongside the new teachings commended for bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna *sūtras*.

The Mahāyāna subsumed the earlier ethical teachings under an expanded framework of its own, within which three levels were identified. The first level is known as 'Moral Discipline' (*saṃvara-śīla*) and consists of the observance of basic moral precepts. The second level is known as the 'Cultivation of Virtue' (*kuśala-dharma-saṃgrāhaka-śīla*) and is concerned with the accumulation of the virtues and other good qualities necessary for the attainment of nirvana. The third category is 'Altruistic Conduct' (*sattva-artha-kriyā-śīla*) and consists of moral action directed to the needs of others. Mahāyāna sources claimed that the early followers (*śrāvakas*) had not progressed much beyond the first of these levels and so their morality was of an inferior kind. Earlier schools, now referred to disparagingly as the 'small vehicle' (*hīnayana*), were criticized for an alleged selfishness and lack of concern for others.

The Six Perfections

1. generosity (*dāna*)
2. morality (*śīla*)
3. patience (*kṣānti*)
4. perseverance (*vīrya*)
5. meditation (*samādhi*)
6. wisdom (*prajñā*)

As part of its sweeping reinterpretation of early teachings, the Mahāyāna introduced a new emphasis in ethics. The figure of the bodhisattva and the practice of the Six Perfections (*pāramitā*) came to occupy centre-stage. The Six Perfections are generosity (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), perseverance (*vīrya*), meditation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). We can see that the six *pāramitās* include the three factors of the Eightfold Path (morality, meditation, and wisdom) arranged in a slightly different form. Mahāyāna literature constantly proclaims the importance of compassion (*karuṇā*), and at times raises it to the status of a supreme virtue, sometimes eclipsing even wisdom (*prajñā*).

The Bodhisattva

A bodhisattva is literally an 'enlightened being', one who has postponed personal salvation out of a compassionate desire to save all sentient beings. Motivated by boundless compassion (*mahākaruṇā*) and inspired to seek the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā*), the bodhisattva first completes three basic prerequisites that include generating the thought of enlightenment

(*bodhicitta*); undertaking a formal vow to gain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings (*praṇidhāna*); and receiving a prediction with regard to future attainment (*vyākaraṇa*). Then, a path known as the 'bodhisattva path' is traversed which includes ten stages (*bhūmis*). This path requires rejection of the personal attainment of nirvana, deliberately seeking rebirth in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, and sharing all merit accrued with other sentient beings. Given the importance of the bodhisattva ideal, it became common to refer to the Mahāyāna simply as the *bodhisattva-yāna*, or 'the vehicle of the bodhisattvas.'

Compassion

Compassion is the desire that others be free of suffering and the resolve to bring this about. While the historical Buddha was a compassionate individual, the Buddha of the Mahāyāna is seen as a supernatural being who can manifest and transform himself in myriad ways to ease the suffering of beings throughout the cosmos. The bodhisattva seeks to emulate this capacity and cultivates *bodhicitta* or the thought of awakening to obtain the same powers and produce the same results. The bodhisattva, of course, does not disappear into final nirvana in the way the historical Buddha appeared to but remains in *saṃsāra* so that he can carry out his saving work. Mahāyāna texts like the Bodhicaryāvatāra (VII.16; VIII.120) praise practices that deepen the feeling of compassion, such as that of 'exchanging oneself and others' (*parātma-parivartana*) by imaginatively placing oneself in the situation of suffering beings and taking their suffering upon oneself. Another commendable practice is extending compassion to enemies, and a third is imagining all sentient beings as one's mother and acting towards them with the same tender feelings.

In Mahāyāna Buddhism, the attribute of compassion is particularly associated with the great bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara ('the one who looks down from on high'). Avalokiteśvara is first mentioned in the Lotus Sūtra (c. first century CE) and remains a minor figure until his cult became popular in Tibet many centuries later. In Tibetan iconography he is depicted as having many heads and up to a thousand arms, symbolizing his vigilance and readiness to help those in need. In China, Avalokiteśvara assumed a female form, and is widely revered under the name Guanyin (Jap.: Kwannon). In whatever form he is visualised, Avalokiteśvara is appealed to by those in need or danger across the Buddhist world.

Skilful Means

An important innovation in Mahāyāna ethics was the notion of 'Skilful Means' (*upāya-kauśalya*). The roots of this notion are found in the Buddha's skill in teaching the Dhamma, demonstrated in his ability to adapt his message to the context in which it was delivered. For example, when talking to Brahmins, the Buddha would explain his teachings by reference to their rituals and traditions, leading his audience step by step to see the truth of a Buddhist tenet. Parables, metaphors, and similes formed an important part of his teaching repertoire, skilfully tailored to the level of his audience. The Mahāyāna developed this idea in a radical way by intimating that the early teachings were not just skilfully delivered, but were a means to an end in their entirety in the sense that they contained nothing that could not be modified to suit the demands of changing situations.

The doctrine of skilful means is expounded at an early date in texts such as the Upāyakauśalya Sūtra, the Lotus Sūtra, and the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra. In Chapter 2 of the Lotus Sūtra, the Buddha introduces the doctrine of skilful means and demonstrates using parables why it is necessary for him to make use of stratagems and devices. The text depicts him as a wise old man or kindly father whose words his foolish children refuse to heed. To encourage them to follow his advice he has recourse to skilful means, realizing that this is the only way to bring the ignorant and deluded into the path to liberation. Although this involves a certain degree of duplicity, such as telling lies, the Buddha is exonerated from all blame since his motivation is compassionate concern for beings.

> The new imperative was to act in accordance with the spirit rather than the letter of the precepts, and some sources go so far as to allow compassion (*karuṇā*) to override the precepts and sanction immoral acts if the bodhisattva sees that so doing would prevent or reduce suffering.

As noted, this idea has certain implications for ethics. If the teachings of the historical Buddha were provisional rather than ultimate, then perhaps the precepts they contain are also of a provisional nature. Thus, the rules encountered in the early sources could be interpreted as guidelines rather than as ultimately binding. In particular, bodhisattvas — the new moral heroes of the Mahāyāna—could claim increased latitude based on the importance of compassion. A bodhisattva takes a vow to save all beings, and there is evidence in many texts of impatience with rules that get in the way of a

bodhisattva going about his salvific mission. The new imperative was to act in accordance with the spirit rather than the letter of the precepts, and some sources go so far as to sanction immoral acts if the bodhisattva sees that so doing would prevent or reduce suffering.

According to the Skill-in-Means Sūtra (Upāyakauśalya Sūtra) dating to around the 1st century BCE, even killing is justified to prevent someone committing a heinous crime and suffering karmic retribution in hell. Elsewhere, telling lies, abandoning celibacy, and other breaches of the precepts are said to be permissible in exceptional circumstances. It is not always clear whether such behaviour is held up by the texts as a model for imitation, or simply as a vivid illustration of the great compassion of bodhisattvas who willingly accept the karmic consequences of breaking the precepts as the price of helping others. As with the story of Vessantara, we must decide whether we are meant to copy such behaviour or simply admire it from afar.

As mentioned earlier, in Tantric teachings moral precepts are sometimes also set aside. Tantra, also known as the *Vajrayāna* ('Diamond Vehicle') or *Mantrayāna* ('Vehicle of Mantras'), is a form of Buddhism that developed in India in the 6th century CE and is characterized by antinomianism (the reversal of moral norms) and the use of magical techniques that aim to speed the practitioner to enlightenment in a single lifetime. Tantra aims to transmute negative mental energies into positive ones using a form of mystical alchemy that is believed to radically transform the personality. By liberating energy trapped at an instinctual level in emotions such as fear and lust it was thought that practitioners could do the psychological equivalent of splitting the atom and use the energy produced to propel themselves to enlightenment.

In certain forms of Tantra, such practices involved the deliberate and controlled reversal of moral norms and the breaking of taboos to help jolt the mind out of its conventional patterns of thought into a higher state of awareness. Examples of such activities include drinking alcohol and sexual intercourse, both serious breaches of the monastic rules. While some practitioners took such teachings literally, however, others saw them as merely symbolic and useful subjects for meditation.

This completes our review of Buddhist moral teachings. In the next chapter we consider how these teachings might be classified from the perspective of moral philosophy.

7 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Dhamma or 'natural law' is the objective foundation of Buddhist moral teachings.
- The Noble Eightfold Path has three divisions: Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom.
- The Fourth Noble Truth is the 'path' to nirvana. The path begins with the practice of morality (*sīla*) in the form of right speech, right action, and right livelihood.
- There are two kinds of nirvana: nirvana-in-this-life, and nirvana after death.
- The three 'cardinal virtues' (*akusala-mūla*) of Buddhism are non-greed (*arāga*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). Other important virtues include generosity (*dāna*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and non-harming (*ahiṃsā*).
- Karma is a moral law (*kamma-niyāma*) that is part of the natural order. It is not deterministic.
- The Buddha identified karma with intention (*cetanā*). The good results of karma are known as merit (*puñña*) and the bad results as demerit (*apuñña or pāpa*).
- The Mahāyāna introduced an expanded three-level conception of moral conduct (*śīla*).

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the Noble Eightfold Path start with morality (*sīla*)?
2. If the Noble Eightfold Path leads to nirvana, why is nirvana not mentioned anywhere in it? Is nirvana reached as the ninth stage of the path, or if not, when?
3. Can we be happy *only* when we reach nirvana?
4. What did the Buddha mean when he taught there is 'no self'? If there is no self, who is it that makes moral choices and suffers the results of good and bad karma?
5. Why did Mahāyāna Buddhism consider itself superior to early Buddhism?
6. According to the Mahāyāna, the Buddha's early followers were concerned only with their own well-being. Is this a fair criticism?

Further Reading

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3 Buddhist Moral Philosophy

1 In this Chapter

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it is only since Buddhism arrived in the West that a nascent discipline of Buddhist ethics has developed. In recent decades, scholars have had recourse to various Western theories in the hope of gaining a deeper insight into the conceptual foundations of Buddhist ethical teachings. Such attempts are not without their problems, but some scholars feel the effort is worthwhile. In this chapter we first review the main branches of Western ethics and their aims. We then consider different theoretical frameworks for classifying the moral teachings described in the previous chapter. The chapter concludes with a discussion of theories of well-being, a topic of central importance both to Buddhism and contemporary ethics.

2 The Classification of Ethics

Ethics may be said to have three main branches: (i) descriptive ethics; (ii) normative ethics; and (iii) metaethics. The job of the first is to give an account of the moral prescriptions, norms, and values of a community or group and to show how action-guiding precepts and principles are applied in specific contexts. Essentially it tells us how people in a given society conduct themselves. The second branch, normative ethics, proposes general rules and principles governing how people *ought* to conduct themselves, and offers justification for the norms it proposes. Finally, metaethics sees its task as providing conceptual clarification by analysing the meaning of moral terms and assessing the overall coherence of the various elements of an ethical system such as its moral psychology, theory of action, and values. In setting out the moral *teachings* of Buddhism, the previous chapter was concerned with descriptive ethics while the present chapter and most of the remainder of the book consider questions of a metaethical nature.

> The three main branches of ethics are:
> (i) descriptive ethics
> (ii) normative ethics
> (iii) metaethics

3 Three Ethical Theories

Three of the most influential theories of ethics in the West have been deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is the most famous exponent of deontological ethics, an approach that emphasizes notions of duty and obligation and typically looks backwards for justification. For example, a deontologist might suggest that the reason I am morally obliged to pay money to Tom today is because I promised to do so when I borrowed it from him yesterday. My promise in the past gave rise to an obligation which I now have a duty to discharge. Deontological systems of ethics emphasize duties that are typically expressed in the form of rules, commandments, and precepts. They pay little attention to whether doing our duty will make us happier.

By contrast, consequentialism—a theory associated with Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) and known in its classical form as 'utilitarianism'—seeks justification through the good consequences expected to flow from the performance of an act. Consequentialists would justify the repayment of my debt by pointing to the satisfaction it will give Tom to have his money returned, the benefit of the maintenance of our friendship, the advantage of being able to ask Tom for another loan if the need arises, and the general good to society that flows from people keeping promises and paying debts. They will weigh up these consequences against the disadvantages of not repaying the loan—such as the loss of friendship, confidence, and trust—and conclude that the former is the morally correct choice. On this theory, it is because repaying debts makes people happier that we should do it.

According to virtue ethics, of which Aristotle (384–322 BCE) was a leading exponent, what is of primary importance are neither pre-existing obligations nor pleasant outcomes, but the development of character so that a person becomes habitually and spontaneously good. 'Virtue' is a translation of the Greek *arete*, which means 'excellence'. In the context of ethics, virtue means excellence in conduct, and many different virtues are recognised. Aristotle called the intellectual virtue that oversees right conduct 'practical wisdom' (*phronesis*), and mentions twelve moral virtues as follows:

1. Courage (bravery and valour when faced with danger)
2. Temperance (self-control and restraint)
3. Liberality (big-heartedness, charity and generosity)
4. Magnificence (radiance, charisma, joie de vivre)
5. Pride (justified self-satisfaction)
6. Honour (respect, reverence, admiration)
7. Good Temper (equanimity, level headedness)
8. Friendliness (conviviality, sociability)
9. Truthfulness (straightforwardness, frankness and candour)
10. Wit (a sense of humour, being good company)
11. Friendship (camaraderie and companionship)
12. Justice (impartiality, even-handedness and fairness)

These are virtues that seemed important to Aristotle, but there are others. A Christian might include humility on his list, while Buddhists and Confucians might have different priorities. There will undoubtedly be common ground, however, since virtues like courage, liberality, and truthfulness are valued the world over.

A virtue is a habitual way of acting in an excellent or admirable manner, especially when there are competing interests at stake. Thus, the just person acts fairly, and divides the cake evenly despite the temptation to serve herself a larger slice. The courageous person acts bravely despite the danger to herself, and so on with the rest. The virtuous person instinctively acts well in such situations, not because she thinks it is her duty nor because she calculates it will bring about the best consequences, but first and foremost because of the kind of person she is.

> **Deontology** emphasize duties and obligations of the kind typically expressed in the form of rules, commandments, and precepts.
>
> **Consequentialism** justifies actions by reference to their beneficial outcomes.
>
> **Virtue ethics** is the view that the development of good character is the basis of the moral life.

In the example of repaying a debt, we would have every expectation that the virtuous person would repay her debt to Tom because the virtue of justice would incline her to act in a way that was fair. It would simply seem wrong to treat Tom unfairly. In this respect her actions would resemble those of the deontologist, although her motivation would be different. Rather

than having to remind herself of her duty, and possibly overcome a natural inclination to keep the money, the virtuous person would spontaneously and gladly repay the debt. The virtuous person would also grasp intuitively, as reinforced through her own experience, that repaying debts is the kind of thing that makes a person happier in the long term. Aristotle called the state of happiness that results from living virtuously *eudaimonia*, a term best translated as 'flourishing' or 'thriving.'

The reference to the agent's happiness brings out a similarity with the reasoning of the consequentialist, but again the motivation is different. The virtuous person intuitively knows that repaying a debt is the just and honourable thing to do, while the consequentialist repays the debt only after calculating that it would lead to an increase in happiness. Conceivably, the consequentialist might conclude that *not* repaying the debt was the right thing to do whereas a virtuous person (or a deontologist) would be unlikely to agree, except in exceptional circumstances.

Agent-centred or Action-centred

We can classify the three theories just discussed as agent-centred or action-centred. Agent-centred theories emphasise states of mind, motivation, and character. Theories of ethics from the ancient world tend to be agent-centred. Most of those from the classical West were, as we see in the case of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics. There are also examples from the East. Confucianism, for instance, seems to be an example of agent-centred ethics since the goal is for the individual to become a 'sage' (*junzi*) by patiently cultivating virtue. Given its emphasis on psychology, Buddhism, too, would fit this mould.

> **Agent-centred** theories focus on the *psychology* of the moral agent.
> **Action-centred** theories focus on the *acts* (and their consequences) the moral agent performs.

Action-centred theories, by contrast, are associated with modern thinkers like Kant and Mill. Action-centred theories offer objective criteria by which we can judge *actions* as right or wrong. Deontologists, like Kant, judge an action based on its conformity to laws, rules, or commandments. Kant said that we should always respect the unconditional moral principle he called the 'categorical imperative.' This can be formulated in different ways, but in one form it states that valid moral judgements must be 'universalizable', in other

words, the rule underlying the conduct in question should be applicable to everyone in similar circumstances. If the contemplated conduct fails this test it should not be performed. Another formulation of the categorical imperative is that we should always treat people as ends rather than means. This requires that we should never use other people as instruments for our own purposes. By testing one's proposed actions against these standards a person can know whether he should perform them or not.

Utilitarianism is also an act-centred philosophy because it holds that the validity of moral judgements is determined by acts and their consequences, rather than the psychology of the agent. For utilitarians, the right act is the one which, in the well-known formulation, produces 'the greatest good for the greatest number.' The agent-centred/act-centred distinction is not hard and fast, however. For example, Kant did not ignore the role of virtues in the moral life because they can help us do our duty; and consequentialists may attach a derivative value to a virtuous character if on balance it leads to good consequences.

4 Similarities and Differences

The preceding account does not do justice to the breadth and sophistication of the three theories considered. Its purpose, however, is merely to show they can each explain some aspect of the moral teachings we outlined in the previous chapter. For example, Buddhism possesses features associated with deontological ethics, as can be seen from moral rules like the Five Precepts. As King informs us:

> The conviction that the principles enshrined in the Five Pre-cepts are part of the eternal order of Dhamma . . . does indeed find some explicit expression among Theravāda Buddhists at the present time. If one specifically questions them about the precepts, most will affirm that they embody universally valid moral principles, With regard to the First Precept it might be stated thus: It is always wrong in any situation in any culture in any age in any universe to kill any creature whatsoever. How much more absolutist than this can one be? (King 2001, 67)

By contrast, belief in karma gives Buddhism a utilitarian flavour since karma suggests that the point of moral action is to create future happiness. Or, to put it slightly differently, to reduce suffering. Since good deeds lead to the reduction of *dukkha* or painful consequences, Buddhism could be classified

as a form of 'negative consequentialism.' The qualification 'negative' picks out the fact that the goal is a reduction in suffering rather than an increase in happiness. We will consider a characterisation of Buddhism along these lines in Chapter 10.

We also find similarities with virtue ethics. Buddhism can be seen as teaching a path of self-transformation (the Eightfold Path) that seeks the elimination of negative psychological states (or vices) like greed, hatred, and delusion, and their replacement by positive or wholesome ones (virtues). The transformation of the ordinary person (*putthujjana*) into a Buddha is believed to come about progressively through the cultivation of the virtues we discussed in the previous chapter leading step by step to the goal of self-realization known as nirvana. Perhaps we can see a similarity (at least a conceptual one) between this state of well-being and Aristotle's goal of happiness as eudaimonia. We will explore this similarity further in Chapter 9.

Applying the distinction between agent-centred and act-centred theories reveals certain similarities with Buddhism, although it is not clear whether Buddhism could be classified exclusively as one or the other. Buddhism's interest in moral psychology, and particularly the definition of karma in terms of intention, suggest it is an agent-centred theory. On the other hand, its various formulations of moral precepts (to be considered in more detail in the next chapter) suggest that it attaches importance to acts and their results.

At first glance, then, we note both similarities and differences between Buddhism and the three ethical theories described. The fact that a given body of moral teachings refers to virtues, rules, or consequences, however, is not by itself sufficient to determine how it should be classified. Common sense tells us that all three factors are important, and a convincing theory of ethics would need to acknowledge some role for each of them. Parents the world over encourage children to obey the rules, think about the consequences of their actions, and develop good habits. It would be strange, therefore, if a supposedly comprehensive theory of ethics excluded any of these factors. Typically, what an ethical theory will do is acknowledge the importance of all three but try to show that one of them has more importance than the others.

Sometimes this is expressed by saying that a theory will recognize several values at a *factoral* level but explain them in terms of one at a *foundational* level (Kagan 1998). Thus, a consequentialist system of ethics may attach importance to virtues and rules at a factoral level but explain their importance at a foundational level by reference to their good consequences. In a similar way, Kant, who is regarded as the father of deontology, also attached

importance to moral virtues and the ultimate happiness he believed would be their reward.

> An ethical theory may recognize several values at a **factoral** level but explain them in terms of one at a **foundational** level. For example, consequentialism recognises the importance of virtues but values them only for the good consequences they produce.

It appears that each of the three theories considered provides a partial fit for Buddhism. Perhaps one of the three is foundational, but this is not an easy thing to demonstrate. The two most promising candidates seem to be virtue ethics and consequentialism, and for this reason we have selected them for discussion in Chapters 9 and 10. Perhaps one of them can provide a satisfactory foundational account of Buddhist ethics.

5 Particularism

Some scholars have wondered whether the search for a foundational explanation is misconceived. They suggest that Buddhism does not endorse any one ethical theory and instead picks and chooses according to the needs of the situation, a bit like a workman who selects the tool most appropriate for the job. On this basis Charles Hallisey has suggested that Buddhists did not follow any one ethical theory but 'adopted a kind of ethical particularism' (Hallisey 1996, 37). This approach has been followed by other writers (Heim 2013, 2020) and applied specifically to the issue of Buddhist warfare (Bartholomeusz 2002).

Ethical Particularism comes in different forms, but essentially is a meta-theory holding that moral judgements should be determined by factors relevant to the context. The classical version of the theory was developed by Scottish philosopher W. D. Ross (1877–1971). His theory is deontological insofar as it emphasises duty but is pluralistic in holding that duties are *prima facie* rather than absolute. What this means is that the agent must determine which duties take priority in a particular situation. In contrast to Kant, who derived all duties from a universal 'categorical imperative', Ross identified a list of independent and defeasible duties. These include fidelity (we should keep our promises), non-maleficence (we should refrain from harming others), beneficence (we should be kind to others), self-improvement (we should strive to improve our own well-being), and justice (we should always try to be fair).

Particularism recognises that circumstances may arise in which duties conflict, and that discretion must be exercised when deciding how to proceed. For example, justice may require that we repay the loan to Tom, whereas beneficence may require that we give the money to Harry, who needs it to buy food. Or again, to be fair to one person it may be necessary to break a promise to another. It is impossible to specify in advance when exceptions should be made because the circumstances in each case will be different, so individuals must rely on their own considered judgement in deciding which duties take precedence. Particularism thus seeks to turn the classical virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) into a supreme moral principle.

Philosopher Jay Garfield has developed an approach that might be labelled 'phenomenological particularism'. This combines a moderate form of particularism which respects the basic moral rules but allows scope for flexibility and open-mindedness in novel situations. Garfield describes his approach as follows:

> 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 ... Buddhist ethics is a moral phenomenology concerned with the transformation of our experience of the world, and hence our overall comportment to it. (Garfield 2015, 279)

In addition to recognising the uniqueness of situations, this approach draws attention to the psychological and epistemological matrix that conditions the perspective of the moral subject. The way we act is conditioned by our psychology and from this perspective ethics is concerned primarily with how we perceive situations. Garfield sees the principal concern of Buddhism as ending suffering and believes our phenomenological orientation towards the world together with an understanding of dependent origination is key to this achievement (Garfield 2015, 280–81). The emphasis accordingly falls on the 'input' rather than the 'output' side, defining this as an 'agent-centred' rather than 'act-centred' approach. The 'input' side itself, of course, is a construct, so what we see as morally significant in a situation is determined to a large extent by our character and values. This is also what virtue ethics claims, so there is common ground between the two approaches. The phenomenological approach, however, prioritises epistemic over moral virtue.

There is much in Particularism that Buddhism would be in sympathy with, such as the *prima facie* obligations to be kind to others, to avoid harming them, and to strive to improve ourselves. While deontology is commonly associated with duties of a negative kind, such as not breaking the precepts, we see that it can also include positive duties such as creating good in the world. The Particularist interpretation also has the advantage of validating the Mahāyāna doctrine of 'skilful means.' It would allow, for example, that beneficence (or compassion) can take priority over the precepts in certain circumstances. A Particularist interpretation would recognise that Buddhists prize above all a sense of judgement that allows them to adjust their conduct to the needs of the situation in ways that no ethical theory can determine in advance. Particularists tend to believe that narrative plays a more important part than theory in communicating ethical values because stories capture the nuances of situations and the nature of human experience in a way that theories cannot.

> **Particularism** recognises that duties sometimes conflict, so individuals must use discretion in deciding which duties take precedence in a given situation.

While Particularism has the merit of highlighting the importance of context, it may pay insufficient attention to the *a priori* nature of Dhamma. Dhamma, on one common interpretation, imposes universal obligations rather than provisional ones. Certain kinds of acts are believed by their nature to be 'contrary to Dhamma' and there is no suggestion, at least not in Theravāda Buddhism, that there are circumstances in which they can be condoned. Karma, we might say, does not make exceptions. We are also told that certain things are impossible for an awakened person whatever the circumstances, such as to break the first four precepts and seek sensual pleasure (DN iii.235:495).

In general, Buddhism does not believe that moral choices are validated solely through a discretionary act of choosing, as Particularism suggests. Even if our conscience tells us that we are acting for the best, our moral compass may be misaligned, and certain choices may create bad karma because despite our best intentions they are contrary to Dhamma. The situations Particularists seek to negotiate on a case-by-case basis may therefore be morally constrained to a greater degree than they imagine.

6 Perfectionism

Another way we can conceive of Buddhist ethics is as a form of Perfectionism. The aim of Perfectionism, as we might say today, is 'to be the best version of oneself one can.' Virtue ethics is a form of Perfectionism since it identifies the good with the perfection of virtuous qualities like generosity and wisdom. In developing excellence through the cultivation of specific virtues, we emulate the conduct of role models like teachers, saints, or Buddhas. This form of Perfectionism is characterized as agent-centred or 'agent-relative' since it envisages individuals prioritising their own perfection.

Some Perfectionists, however, focus less on the individual and believe that what should be perfected are overall states of affairs such as the general happiness or well-being of society at large. The goal of this 'agent-neutral' Perfectionism is to make the world a better place. This might be achieved through developments in art and science, economics, politics, or in other ways that benefit the community. Rather than perfecting oneself, the primary objective is the altruistic one of increasing the well-being of others.

> **Perfectionism** comes in two main forms: **agent-relative** and **agent-neutral**. The former prioritises self-development and the latter the improvement of society at large.

It is possible to interpret Buddhism as a form of Perfectionism in either of the above ways. Early Buddhism corresponds more closely to agent-relative Perfectionism since the goal is personal salvation through virtuous self-transformation. In 1936 I.B. Horner published a book titled *The Early Buddhist Theory of Man Perfected* in which she noted 'The whole arahant-theory is based upon the belief in the perfectibility of man, either here and now, or in in some future state' (Horner 1936, 42). She spoke about 'latent potentialities' and the belief that 'it was possible to make these potentialities actual' (Horner 1936, 43). 'Monastic Buddhism,' she wrote, 'is less a philosophical or religious system than a code for conduct and self-training and self-development, whose aim is perfection here and now' (Horner 1936, 141). Karunadasa echoes this sentiment when he states, 'the whole purpose of the four noble truths is to bring imperfect human beings to perfection' (Karunadasa 2017, 76).

Like the authors quoted above, Winston King was a student of Theravāda Buddhism and the first chapter of his pioneering volume on Buddhist ethics is entitled 'The Framework of Self-Perfection'. There he writes 'The ethic

of Buddhism may be described in general as an ethic of self-development'
(King 2001, 5). He speaks of 'the perfection of the saint (*arahant*) and the
Buddha' (King 2001, 6). Later he describes the Buddhist formulation of
ethical values as 'an internalised process of self-perfection' (King 2001, 63)
and writes: 'The essential nature of the ethical life in its widest scope is
that of the development of the self to a kind of supra-personal perfection of
consciousness' (King 2001, 99). Saddhatissa makes a similar point when he
identifies 'the attainment of Nibbāna' with 'perfection in *sīla*, *samādhi* and
paññā' (Saddhatissa 1987, 150).

Mahāyāna Buddhism, by contrast, bears a greater resemblance to agent-
neutral Perfectionism since the moral imperative is to increase universal
happiness by eliminating suffering for all beings. Of course, to be able to
eliminate suffering for others, a bodhisattva must first develop virtues like
wisdom and compassion. It is no coincidence that the group of six virtues
(*pārāmita*) collectively required to act in this way are labelled 'Perfections'.
Perhaps, then, this form of Buddhist ethics could be characterized as an
agent-neutral 'character consequentialism' or 'character-building ethics'.
This formulation acknowledges that Buddhism values both the development
of virtuous character and the reduction of suffering in the world at large.
One of the central questions for Buddhist ethics is how these two aims are
related. We might formulate the question in terms of a dilemma we are now
familiar with. Should the bodhisattva prioritize virtue (through the practice
of the six perfections) or the reduction of suffering? Whichever variety of
Perfectionism we favour, the theory seems to coincide in its broad outline
with the objectives and methods of Buddhist practice.

7 *Sui Generis*

While the interpretations of Buddhist ethics we have considered so far have
their merits, they also have limitations. This has led some scholars to claim
that Buddhism is *sui generis* or 'one of a kind' (Velez de Cea 2004, 138).
The search for an over-arching template, they suggest, is doomed to failure
(this includes Particularism, which as we saw is a meta-theory). In advancing
this view, Harvey provides a list of thirteen factors that characterize immoral
action in Buddhism and concludes that since there is no one theory of
ethics that can explain them all Buddhist ethics must be 'one of a kind'
(Harvey 2010, 207). However, there is little in Harvey's list that could not
be explained by Hindu ethics, or – leaving aside beliefs about karma and
rebirth – Western traditions of virtue ethics, including Christianity.

> Because Buddhism incorporates different ethical theories some scholars believe it is best characterised as *sui generis* or 'one of a kind.'

Many religions embrace features of different ethical theories. Thus, Christian ethics has a well-defined deontological component (as seen in the Ten Commandments), and also values pleasant consequences (notably eternal happiness in heaven). The virtues also form a central part of Christian ethical teachings (for example, the virtues of faith, hope, and charity). Other religions (Hinduism and Islam, for example) also combine these ethical components in various ways but are not on this account thought to be *sui generis*. Perhaps, then, neither is Buddhism.

As already noted, the importance of duties, virtues, and consequences at a factoral level are recognized by many systems of ethics. A nuanced interpretation will not seek to reduce Buddhist ethics to the straitjacket of a single theory but to order these various factoral elements according to their explanatory power. Rather than closing off further enquiry on grounds of Buddhism's 'uniqueness' it seems worthwhile leaving the door open to further investigation.

In sum, we can group the various approaches to interpreting Buddhist ethics into two broad classes. We might call them 'theory' and 'anti-theory'. The former holds that the disparate factoral elements in Buddhist ethical teachings can be united by a theory of some kind (even if as yet undiscovered). The latter believes that by its nature Buddhist ethics cannot be explained by any overarching theory.

> There are two broad approaches to interpreting Buddhist ethics, which we might label 'theory' and 'anti-theory.'

8 Stoicism

As scholars search for a deeper understanding of Buddhist ethics, they turn for inspiration to other ethical teachings both in the ancient and modern world. We have already referred to Aristotle and will have more to say about him in Chapter 9. Another influential set of moral teachings from the ancient world that bears a resemblance to Buddhism is Stoicism. Stoicism was founded by the Greek philosopher Zeno (334–262 BCE) around a century after the death of the Buddha and is currently undergoing a revival.

Despite some obvious differences with Buddhism (Stoics do not believe in karma and rebirth, or in a transcendent state like final nirvana) there are parallels between the two. Various publications have appeared in recent years exploring these similarities (Macaro 2018; Ussher 2018).

Buddhism and Stoicism both teach that life involves suffering, and that happiness can only be found by cultivating the right mental attitude in the face of adversity. For Stoics this means developing the four cardinal virtues of practical wisdom (*phronesis*), justice, temperance (or self-control), and fortitude. In this way one becomes indifferent to pleasure and pain and free from desire, which Stoics (like Buddhists) regard as the primary cause of suffering. As the Roman Stoic Seneca wrote in his *Letters from a Stoic*: 'Virtue is therefore the only good; she marches proudly between the two extremes of fortune, with great scorn for both.'

Stoics prioritise reason over dogma and seek to cultivate emotional resilience in the face of misfortune. They practise indifference or equanimity with respect to 'externals' such as wealth, reputation, health, and other things in life that are beyond our control. As Marcus Aurelius (a Roman emperor of the second 2nd century CE and author of the *Meditations*) expressed it, 'Almost nothing material is needed for a happy life, for he who understands existence.' Seeking to possess worldly goods or control external events, in the Stoic view, only leads to frustration and dissatisfaction. Replacing control with acceptance, according to the Stoics, is the way to achieve eudaimonia. Stoic techniques of mental discipline resemble Buddhist ones to some degree, and both have provided inspiration for contemporary training programmes in mindfulness and cognitive therapy.

9 Confucianism

Apart from Western systems of ethics, another possible comparison with Buddhism is Confucianism. Buddhism spread to China and offered a competing worldview to the Confucian one. Considerable scholarly attention has been given to Confucian ethics in the past three decades, but perhaps surprisingly few direct comparisons have been made with Buddhism despite the fact that Buddhism and Confucianism existed side by side in China for many centuries and were often keen rivals.

Ok-Sun An is one of the few scholars to have investigated their similarities (An 1998). She believes Buddhism and Confucianism identify a common core task of self-transformation and emphasise the importance of compassion (*karuṇā*) and benevolence (*ren*). This self-transformation takes place within

the framework of the path to self-realization leading to the highest moral goal: nirvana for Buddhism and Tao for Confucianism. The process culminates in the transformed personality of the noble one (*arahant*) in Buddhism, and in that of the virtuous one (*chun tzu*) in Confucianism, with the highest ideal embodied in the 'awakened one' (Buddha) and 'the sage' (*sheng jen*).

Scholars have also noted points of similarity between Confucius and Aristotle, as we see below:

> To talk of the good life is to talk about the kind of person one should become. Aristotle and Confucius both pursue the question of the good life, and both recognize that the question of what kind of person is happy is a question that admits a fairly definite sort of answer. Moreover, the answer of these two quite disparate masters is strikingly similar: the happy life is the life of exemplary virtue. Both thinkers emphasize virtue and the significance of exemplary individuals for training in virtue and the dependence of such training on the right sort of social-political context. Aristotle calls the person of exemplary moral virtue the phronimos; Confucius calls him the junzi. (Sim 2007, 23)

Aristotle and Confucius agree that the good life is the life of virtue. Both also agree that virtue is a habit or cultivated disposition to choose a mean or 'middle way' in action. Confucian virtues include *ren* (benevolence), *yi* (honesty or uprightness), *zhi* (knowledge), *xin* (faithfulness or integrity), and *li* (correct behaviour or propriety). Buddhism shares the notion that the virtuous life culminates in happiness (nirvana) but places less importance on the social-political context than Confucius or Aristotle. Further similarities between Confucius and Aristotle are explored in recent works (Angle and Slote 2013; Yu 2007; Mi, Slote, and Sosa 2015) and resemblances between these and Buddhism are noted by Cokelet (2016).

Cross-cultural comparisons of this kind will undoubtedly reveal differences but can also help triangulate commonalities. We can say, for instance, that the concepts of Tao, nirvana, and eudaimonia play an analogous role as the highest good for Confucius, the Buddha, and Aristotle, and in each case the highest good is attained through the cultivation of virtue. As Cokelet notes, 'we can rightly conclude that the Buddhist and Confucian traditions presuppose and discuss various conceptions of human virtue that we might fruitfully compare with ancient Greek and Roman conceptions' (Cokelet 2016, 195).

> Stoics and Confucians share Aristotle's view that the good life is the life of virtue. Buddhism shares this view but places less importance on the socio-political context in which virtue is cultivated.

10 Well-being

We conclude with a topic that draws together threads in the preceding discussion and will be of importance in later chapters. 'Well-being' is an umbrella term that includes all the elements that make a life happy or fulfilled. While talk of well-being is relatively modern, reflection on the state it denotes has a long history. Well-being was known to classical philosophers as *eudaimonia*. Aristotle says that eudaimonia means 'living well or doing well' (NE 1095a19). Rather than describing sensations, moods, or emotions it is an evaluative term that characterizes the state of a life in the round. Happiness in this sense (what has been called 'deep happiness') describes a life that is going well objectively speaking, as opposed to a subjective mental state that may fluctuate ('yesterday I was happy but today I'm sad'). Happiness in the more superficial sense of pleasant feelings is referred to in Pali sources as *sukha* and for Aristotle would fall under the heading of *hedone* or pleasure.

> **Well-being** is an umbrella term that includes all the different elements that go to make up a happy life, or the things that allow us to flourish and find fulfilment. Well-being was known to classical philosophers as *eudaimonia*. Aristotle says that eudaimonia means 'living well or doing well.'

The concept of eudaimonia was central to discussion of ethics in the ancient world because of its role in establishing the parameters of the good life. It provides an answer the question of what kinds of things make life worthwhile. Thinkers in the ancient world gave considerable thought to this question and came up with different answers.

Moral and Prudential good

Some classical philosophers reduced well-being to a single value and can accordingly be described as 'value monists'. If people possessed this one

thing, these philosophers claimed, they would be happy, and their lives would go well. The Stoics, as we discussed earlier, identified this value with virtue. The Epicureans, a rival Greek philosophical school founded by Epicurus (341-270 BCE), agreed that only one thing was required for well-being but chose a different value, namely pleasure. Other philosophers, like Aristotle, were 'value pluralists,' and believed that happiness could not be equated with any one value.

Figure 3.1: The two primary categories of well-being according to Aristotle
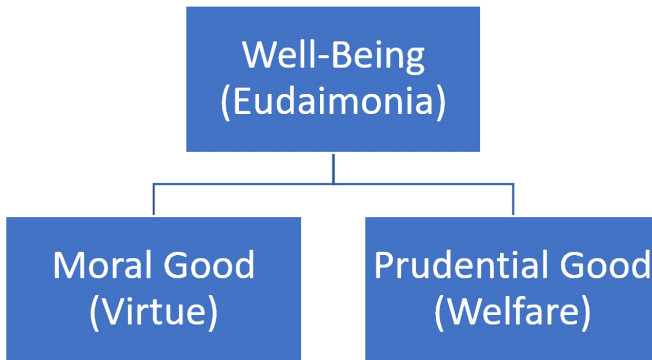
Aristotle identified two categories of value he believed were required for well-being, or for a person to be 'happy' or 'blessed' (*eudaimon*). These are shown in Figure 3.1. The first is moral good, or virtue. We saw that virtue ethics identifies well-being with a life of virtue and teaches that a life bereft of virtue – a life lacking excellence – cannot be a happy one. Buddhism would seem to agree. The Venerable Saddhatissa noted 'Aristotle maintained throughout the fundamental doctrine of Socrates and Plato that "Virtue is Happiness", a doctrine with which Buddhist thought would, in general, be in agreement' (Saddhatissa 1987, 10). But while a life of virtue is necessary for happiness, is it *sufficient*, or do we need something else? What about pleasure, as suggested by Epicurus? Aristotle rejected the idea that pleasure alone is sufficient for well-being, as does Buddhism, but he allows some role for it. Many people would think a life devoid of pleasure, enjoyment, and 'fun' would lack an important ingredient.

Examples of other things we might need to complete our happiness are good health, friendship, economic security, and social esteem. These are sometimes termed 'ordinary' goods to distinguish them from 'moral' goods like the virtues, but as mentioned in the Introduction we will refer to them as 'prudential goods' or 'welfare'. By *prudential good* is meant what is good

for a person in the broadest sense. It refers to what is in a person's interest, what is to his advantage, or what benefits him. In everyday language we might describe such things as 'blessings' or 'boons', or just plain 'good fortune.' 'Prudential good' thus denotes anything that makes a person 'better off' in material, social, and economic terms. 'Well-being' itself I understand in a global sense as including both moral and prudential good as shown in Figure 3.1.

> **Prudential good** denotes anything that makes a person 'better off' or contributes to his **welfare**. In this book these two terms are used interchangeably. Both terms refer primarily to the material, social, and economic conditions of **well-being.**

The question that concerns us is whether Buddhism is a form of value monism or value pluralism . There seems little doubt that Buddhism understands nirvana as the highest form of well-being. But is this state of nirvanic well-being unitary or plural in nature? As mentioned, nirvana is described both as the end of suffering (hence a form of welfare or prudential good); and as the end of greed, hatred, and delusion (hence a moral good). Apparently, it cannot be reduced to a single value and must be pluralistic in a manner similar to Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia. Let us illustrate the Buddhist conception of well-being diagrammatically in Figure 3.2 as we did for Aristotle.

Figure 3.2: The Buddhist conception of well-being
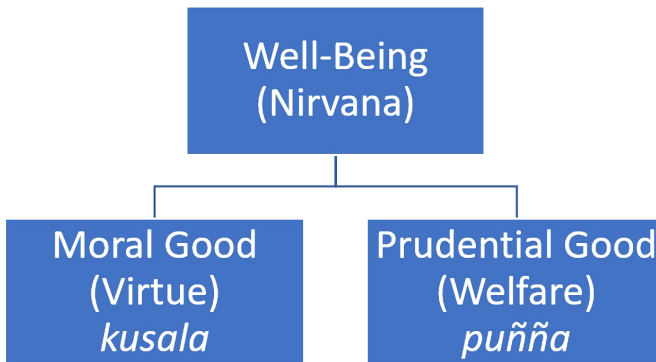
We will examine the terms *kusala* and *puñña* in more detail in Chapter 7. For now, we can simply note that *kusala* is the general Buddhist term

for moral virtue, while the scope of *puñña* (merit) includes the material conditions that determine our quality of life. Welfare is dependent on *puñña* mainly because *puñña* determines the circumstances of rebirth as well as much of the good and bad fortune we experience over a lifetime. We could use other terms to mark this distinction. Karunadasa, for example, informs us that the Pali term *hita* also denotes moral goodness in a similar way to *kusala* (Karunadasa 2017, 90), so the combination of *kusala* and *puñña* might also be signified by the compound *hita-sukha*, meaning moral excellence and worldly happiness. However, the distinction between moral good and prudential good is most commonly conveyed by the terms *kusala* and *puñña* as shown in Figure 3.2.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, there is disagreement over which of these two values (virtue or welfare) is most central to nirvana. An example of this tension was mentioned in the discussion of Perfectionism when we referred to the dilemma faced by the bodhisattva of whether to prioritize the pursuit of virtue or the end of suffering. Perhaps it will be possible to combine the two in a unified theory of well-being, a possibility we will consider in Chapter 6. As a step in that direction we must first review some influential theories of well-being.

Theories of Well-being

In contemporary ethical literature it is common to identify four main theories of well-being. Here we will consider how well they explain the Buddhist concept of nirvana.

Theories of well-being
1. Mental-state theories
2. Desire-satisfaction theories
3. Objective list theories
4. Nature-fulfilment theories

Mental-state theories

As the name implies, mental-state theories claim that well-being consists in the experience of positive mental states. The most well-known theory of this kind is hedonism, which identifies well-being with pleasure. Hedonism has ancient roots and is associated with the teachings of Epicurus whom we mentioned earlier. Epicurus taught that our life's goal should be to minimize

pain and maximize pleasure. In modern times, the idea was developed in various ways by consequentialists like Bentham and Mill.

An apparent similarity with Buddhism is the claim of the Four Noble Truths that life is marred by suffering and that the highest spiritual goal is to reduce and ultimately eliminate it. Buddhist teachings talk a lot about mental states and describe the consciousness of the awakened person as being free of the negative factors that are a cause of dissatisfaction to the normal person. The Abhidhamma classifies mental states in detail and equates the goal of Buddhism with the elimination of all unwholesome (*akusala*) states of mind. The states of mind described in meditation are also graded in a hierarchy in which they become increasingly sublime. However, well-being in Buddhism is not reducible simply to states of mind, as the Abhidhamma analysis might suggest. The state of nirvana-in-this-life has a social dimension to it and involves respecting norms like the precepts and observing duties to others.

> **Mental-state** theories claim that well-being consists in the experience of positive mental states like pleasure.

A peculiar implication of the mental-state theory of well-being is often pointed out by commentators. This is that someone who connected himself to a virtual reality device and experienced the most enjoyable life imaginable would have, according to this theory, experiences that were of equal value to the person who did the same things in real life. Many people, however, would think nothing of value was accomplished by such a virtual existence, and that it is better to live in the real world, despite its problems, than in a fantasy world. As Segall comments, 'It's not so much a "feeling" of happiness that people want, as it is a genuine happiness that comes from living an objectively good life' (Segall 2020, 34). According to Buddhism, moreover, it is only because we encounter the unpleasant fact of suffering that we are motivated to follow the path to nirvana. This was the Buddha's experience when as a young prince he left the palace and saw the 'four sights'. The life of the gods in a dreamy paradise and that of the person in a world of virtual reality resemble the experience of the young Buddha in his palace, but such conditions are temporary and ultimately a distraction rather than a solution to life's problems.

Desire-satisfaction theories

Another understanding of well-being is provided by desire-satisfaction theories. The general idea here is that well-being fluctuates to the extent that

one's desires are satisfied. An obvious problem is that some desires seem opposed to well-being. It seems odd to say that if someone has a desire for drugs, the satisfaction of that desire increases well-being. More sophisticated theories therefore assume a 'well-informed understanding' on the part of the agent such that only the things she desires that are *in fact* good for her contribute to well-being. Some commentators suggest, however, that this theory has things back to front in psychological terms in that it assumes things are good because they satisfy our desires when in fact we desire things only if we first think them good.

From a Buddhist perspective there seems little to recommend theories of this kind since Buddhism teaches that desires are not the source of well-being but the source of suffering, as specified in the Second Noble Truth. However, this depends on how we understand 'desire'. Let us recall that the Second Noble Truth does not speak of 'desire' but of *taṇhā*. *Taṇhā* signifies a deluded or perverted form of desire of the kind that draws us deeper into suffering. The desire to follow the Eightfold Path, by contrast, is a virtuous or wholesome form of desire that we might term a noble aspiration.

> **Desire-satisfaction** theories identify well-being with the satisfaction of desires.

Perhaps we could say, then, that Buddhism qualifies as a desire-satisfaction theory because it identifies well-being with the satisfaction of *wholesome* desires. This is correct if we view matters from a phenomenological perspective, since one who desires nirvana (or any good thing) and achieves it will certainly be happier. The explanation, however, puts the emphasis in the wrong place. The happiness of a person who attains nirvana comes not from the bare satisfaction of the desire but from the objective goodness of nirvana. Nirvana does not cause happiness because the desire to attain it has been satisfied, but because nirvana is fulfilling by its very nature.

Objective List theories

'Objective list' theories offer a third approach to understanding well-being. As the name suggests, these theories provide a list of values on which well-being is thought to depend. Items commonly found on such lists include achievement, freedom, knowledge, autonomy, loving relationships, pleasure, health, aesthetic appreciation, and self-respect. Many people will agree that these values are important, and that a life from which they were absent would be diminished. Lists of such values are described as 'objective' because it is

thought the items they identify are *in fact* necessary for well-being even if individuals fail to appreciate their importance. In this respect an objective list judges the quality of a life from the outside rather than from the perspective of the proprietor of that life who may feel she can get by perfectly well without the items on the list. This claim to objectivity contrasts with the subjectivism of 'desire satisfaction' theories. However, some regard this objective aspect of the theory as elitist for it seems to be telling people that certain things are good for them even if they do not find those things important.

> **Objective list** theories provide a list of specific items which are believed to be essential components of well-being.

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From a Buddhist perspective, it would not be difficult to compile an objective list. Wisdom (*paññā*) is one thing we could include and moral virtue (*sīla*) another. The Abhidhamma list of virtuous *dhammas* is perhaps the oldest 'objective list' in the world. The Abhidhamma list, however, says little about prudential good, and we might wonder whether it is unduly narrow for this reason. The Buddha mentions many other good things in his discourses, including health and beauty, and 'external' goods like wealth, friendship, and reputation. Presumably, these things also have some role to play in well-being and so deserve a place on the list. Charles Goodman has proposed a two-item objective list for Buddhism. The two items are 'virtue' and 'worldly happiness', and these seem to capture the two broad dimensions of well-being as we have suggested Buddhism conceives it. We will consider this proposal in more detail in Chapter 10.

Nature-fulfilment theories

A fourth and final class of theories of well-being are known as 'nature-fulfilment' theories. Unlike objective list theories, which simply *enumerate* values, nature-fulfilment theories provide an *explanation* as to why certain values are important. The explanation is that the factors identified fulfil our nature in some way.

Theories of this kind, which are commonly associated with Aristotle, reject subjectivism about the good. What makes a thing good is now not that it is pleasant or desired but that it in some way perfects or completes a being's nature. This theory of goodness is linked to an anthropology that defines the

scope for fulfilment by reference to the innate powers or capacities of the nature in question. Truths about what is good for human beings are therefore grounded in facts about human physical and psychological functioning.

Nature-fulfilment theories see human beings against the background of the natural world and believe that plants and animals no less than human beings can attain a state of well-being or flourishing appropriate to their natures.

> **Nature-fulfilment** theories believe that well-being results from the fulfilment of certain innate powers or natural capacities. In the case of human beings, the power of reason is the most important natural capacity.

The well-being of a plant, on this understanding, is to flower and bear fruit, and the well-being of an animal is to grow to maturity and produce offspring. Human beings have certain unique capacities such as the use of reason and the ability to produce and transmit culture. These natural capacities are the foundation for distinctively human values: human beings can develop aesthetic sensibilities and appreciate art and literature whereas animals cannot. Aristotle fixed on rationality as the most important natural function of a human being. He believed reason functioned in both in a philosophical or scientific sense (*sophia*), yielding knowledge of the truth, and in an applied sense yielding practical wisdom (*phronesis*), the virtue that allows us to make wise moral choices. Buddhism seems to agree that it is by developing certain capacities natural to human beings alone, such as wisdom and virtue, that well-being is attained. Nirvana can thus be understood as the fulfilment of the potential that a human nature makes available. This, in turn, explains why Buddhism places such importance on a human rebirth.

In sum, the theories just discussed are useful ways of approaching the subject of well-being, but it should be borne in mind the differences between them are not hard and fast. There may be overlap in the values recognised as constitutive of well-being. Thus, knowledge may appear on an 'objective list' and also be valued by a nature-fulfilment theory. Deciding which theory of well-being best characterises Buddhism is not a straightforward matter. We will return to this question in Chapters 9 and 10 because the 'objective list' and 'nature-fulfilment' theories are associated with Aristotle and Consequentialism, respectively.

11 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- The field of ethics can be divided into descriptive ethics, normative ethics, and metaethics.
- Three influential theories of ethics are deontology, consequentialism, and virtue ethics.
- Theories can be classified as 'agent-centred' or 'act-centred.'
- 'Particularism' is the view that *prima facie* duties must be prioritised as the context demands.
- 'Perfectionism' identifies the good with the perfection of certain qualities. It can be agent-relative or agent-neutral.
- Human goods can be classified in various ways. A broad general distinction is into moral and prudential good.
- Contemporary theories of well-being include mental-state theories, desire-satisfaction theories, objective list theories, and nature-fulfilment theories.

Discussion Questions

1. Which should be given priority: doing one's duty, seeking good consequences, or developing a virtuous character?
2. Which ethical theory has the closest resemblance to Buddhism?
3. Is Buddhist ethics *sui generis* (one of a kind)?
4. Which is more important for happiness: virtue or prudential good?
5. Is happiness simply a state of mind, or is it getting the things you want?
6. Make an 'objective list' of the things you think are needed for a happy life.
7. Is there such a thing as human nature, and can it be perfected?

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4 *Sīla*

1 In this Chapter

In our review of Buddhist moral teachings in Chapter 2 we postponed discussion of the precepts for fuller consideration. To this we turn our attention in the present chapter. *Sīla* is the Buddhist term that corresponds most closely to what in the West is referred to as 'ethics' or 'morality'. *Sīla* is not identical in meaning to these terms, but there is a certain amount of overlap, as we shall see. The term *sīla* is use in two main ways: first, to refer to moral precepts and conduct in accordance with them; and second to denote the first of the three components of the Eightfold Path. These two usages are not unrelated. To understand the evolution of this relationship we explore the meaning of *sīla* as found in a group of early *suttas* in the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya) of the Pali canon. We will see that *sīla* is based on the conduct of Gotama the *Samaṇa* and that it is the conduct of the Buddha that provides the foundation for Buddhist ethics.

2 *Sīla* and the Precepts

Sīla (Skt *śīla*) is a term with broad and specific meanings. Martin Adam explains it in the following way:

> The term that most closely corresponds to *morality* in the Buddhist lexicon is *sīla* (*śīla*). *Sīla* can also be translated as moral conduct, virtue, good habit, moral training, ethics, and so on. Throughout the *Nikāyas* the word appears as a category heading in a number of lists of positively valued behaviours whose practice is thought to facilitate the attainment of liberating knowledge, while at the same time benefiting other living beings.

He goes on to draw out an important implication of its meaning:

Most employments of the term *sīla* share in the idea of a disciplined restraint of activity, an ongoing effort of will *not to act* (as opposed to an impulse *to act*) in certain specific ways – usually through the following of a rule or precept. There is a further implication that *sīla* involves a *deliberate effort*, as opposed to a spontaneous impulse, not to act in particular ways. The behaviour enjoined is described in terms of *restraints* of various kinds on one's conduct, aiding to bring it, and the mind of craving on which it rests, under control. (Adam 2018, 79 original emphasis)

Egge notes '*sīla* indicates observing a set of ascetic restrictions ritualized by the taking of vows' (Egge 2015, 27f). Barbra Clayton sums up the various senses of *śīla* as follows:

Though often translated loosely as 'morality,' 'ethics,' or 'virtue,' more helpfully *śīla* may be understood in terms of propriety, 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. (Clayton 2011, 284)

As to the *point* of the various injunctions or precepts she explains:

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. (Clayton 2011, 286)

In sum, we could say that *sīla* is the habitual practice of self-restraint that is the foundation of decorous conduct and a practice that facilitates the attainment of liberating knowledge.

> ***Sīla*** is the habitual practice of self-restraint that is the
> foundation of decorous conduct and a practice that
> facilitates the attainment of liberating knowledge.

The Collection of Suttas on *Sīla*

Precepts governing the conduct of both laity and monks are found in all
schools of Buddhism, but what is the origin of these precepts and what
role do they play in the path to awakening? To answer these questions, we
turn our attention the first thirteen *suttas* of the Long Discourses (Dīgha
Nikāya) of the Pali canon. These thirteen *suttas* go by the collective name
'Sīlakkhandhavagga', or 'the Collection of *suttas* on *sīla*' (the 'Collection'
for short). The reason these thirteen *suttas* are grouped together is because
they have much to say about *sīla*, in two main respects. The first concerns
sīla as moral precept, and the second concerns *sīla* as a component (*khandha*)
of the Eightfold Path.

> The **Sīlakkhandhavagga** (or 'Collection of *suttas* on *sīla*')
> is the name given to the first thirteen suttas of the Long Dis-
> courses (Dīgha Nikāya). Each of these *suttas* contains a long
> passage on morality divided into three tracts (*vaggas*) list-
> ing various *sīlas* or moral observances for which 'the ascetic
> Gotama' might be praised.

The first discourse of the Dīgha Nikāya, the Brahmajāla Sutta (Discourse
on Brahma's Net), takes as its point of departure reasons why people might
choose to praise or criticize the Buddha. The Buddha says that people might
praise him first for his moral conduct and describes this by reference to a
long list of moral observances or *sīlas* he adheres to. This list is repeated in
a lengthy stock passage that occurs in each of the thirteen discourses of the
Collection.

This long passage is divided into three tracts (*vaggas*) listing various *sīlas*
or moral observances for which 'the ascetic Gotama' might be praised by
a worldly person. The three tracts are known as the short (*cūla*), medium
(*majjhima*) and long (*mahā*) *sīlas,* and I will refer to them collectively as
the Three Tracts. The fact that the Three Tracts are repeated in each of the
first thirteen *suttas* of the Dīgha Nikāya suggests they are a stereotyped
formula of some antiquity. Such is the opinion of translator Rhys Davids,
who regards the Three Tracts as an early independent work, noting they
'must almost certainly have existed as a separate work before the time when

the discourses, in each of which it recurs, were first put together' (1921 vol. 1. p.3n). Sections of the first two Tracts are found elsewhere in the canon, perhaps in an earlier form (Somaratne 2016), but the Three Tracts as we find them have a strong claim to constitute the foundation of Buddhist moral practice.

The Three Tracts tell us that the Buddha abstains from all the following:

The Short Tract

1. Taking life.
2. Taking what has not been given.
3. Unchastity.
4. Lying.
5. Slanderous speech.
6. Harsh speech.
7. Frivolous talk.
8. Causing injury to seeds or plants.
9. Eating more than once and after midday.
10. Watching shows, fairs, dancing, singing and music.
11. Ornaments, garlands, scents, and unguents.
12. Use of large and lofty beds.
13. Accepting gold and silver.
14. Accepting uncooked grain.
15. Accepting raw meat.
16. Accepting women or girls.
17. Accepting bondsmen or bondswomen.
18. Accepting sheep or goats.
19. Accepting fowls or swine.
20. Accepting elephants, cattle, horses, and mares.
21. Accepting cultivated fields or sites.
22. Acting as a go-between or messenger.
23. Buying and selling.
24. Cheating with scales, bronzes, or measures.
25. Bribery, cheating and fraud.
26. Maiming, murdering, putting in bonds, highway robbery, dacoity and violence.

The Medium Tract

1. Injury to seedlings and plants.
2. Use of things stored up (food, drink, clothes, provisions, etc.).
3. Visiting shows (sixteen kinds specified).
4. Games and recreations (eighteen kinds specified).
5. High and large couches (twenty kinds specified).
6. Adorning and beautifying the person.
7. Low forms of discourse (e.g. stories and gossip).
8. Argumentative phrases.
9. Acting as a go-between or messenger.
10. Simony.

The Long Tract

1. 'Low arts' such as palmistry.
2. Knowledge of the signs of good and bad qualities in things denoting the health or luck of their owner.
3. Soothsaying.
4. Foretelling eclipses, etc.
5. Foretelling rainfall, etc.
6. Use of charms and incantations.
7. Use of medicines and drugs.

At first sight this is a strange assortment of precepts, but the arrangement is not entirely random. It seems that the Short Tract has a claim to be primary, and that the Medium and Long Tracts expand on certain aspects in the manner of a commentary. For example, the *Short Tract* prohibits attendance at shows (item 10), and the Medium Tract goes on to specify sixteen kinds of shows included in the prohibition. Again, the Short Tract prohibits the use of high beds (item 12) and the Medium Tract stipulates twenty examples of the kind of beds to be avoided. Likewise, the Short Tract prohibits numerous kinds of wrong livelihood (13-26), and the Long Tract adds to this by describing various kinds of fortune-telling which should be avoided. Another reason for regarding the Short Tract as primary is that other lists of moral precepts consist largely of a reformulation of the items it contains. The twenty-six items listed in the Short Tract fall into four loose groupings, concerning:

1. Immoral acts of body and speech (items 1-7)
2. Austerity in lifestyle (items 8-12).
3. Offerings not to be accepted (items 13-21).
4. Commercial or criminal activity (items 22-6).

Each of these four groupings expresses normative concern in respect of matters impinging on the life of a religious mendicant (*samaṇa*). The individual items are introduced by announcing them as observances of 'Gotama the *Samaṇa.*' Consider the first of the Short Tract*:* 'Putting aside the killing of living things, Gotama the *Samaṇa* refrains from the destruction of life.' The Short Tract seeks to define what is most essential in this way of life by specifying the conduct of Gotama, while the Medium and Long Tracts distinguish the conduct of Gotama from other less worthy *Samaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas.* This may be seen in the first item of the Long Tract*:* 'Whereas some *Samaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas,* while living off food provided by the faithful, continue attached [to such and such conduct], Gotama the *Samaṇa* refrains from this.' The code of conduct described in the Three Tracts was most likely followed by ascetics from different sects, so the rules are not unique to Buddhism (Egge 2015, 28).

After specifying the Buddha's *sīla*, the Discourse on Brahma's Net moves on to a different topic and provides a list of sixty-two speculative views on questions like the ultimate beginnings of things and the eternality of the world and the self. The Buddha says such views derive from a lack of knowledge and understanding on the part of certain ascetics and brahmins. The point they have in common is that they are false doctrines that the Buddha does not teach.

The Discourse on Brahma's Net thus provides us first with a lengthy list of moral practices (the Three Tracts) followed by a lengthy list of metaphysical views. Its intention seems to be to provide a catalogue of moral practices and philosophical views current in the Buddha's day and to define the Buddha's position in relation to them. Why would it seek to do this? As noted, the question posed at the start is why the Buddha would be deemed worthy of praise by an ordinary person. The answer, given in a roundabout way, is that the Buddha is worthy of praise for two reasons: he adheres to a strict moral code and is free of false views. He is perfect, we might say, in *sīla* and *paññā*. This is of importance since, as we shall see, the conduct of the Buddha as defined in the Short Tract becomes the foundation for the Buddhist precepts and the basis of the path to nirvana.

Preceptual formulas

There are five main canonical formulations of moral precepts as shown in the text box below:

> 1. The Five Precepts (*pañcasīla)*
> 2. The Eight Precepts (*aṭṭhaṅgasīla)*
> 3. The Ten Precepts (*dasasīla)*
> 4. The Ten Good Paths of Action (*dasakusalakammapatha)*
> 5. The *Pātimokkha*

The Five Precepts The Five Precepts are an undertaking to abstain from:

1. Taking life (*pāṇātipāta*)
2. Taking what has not been given (*adinnādāna*)
3. Sexual misconduct (*kāmesu-micchācāra*)
4. Telling lies (*musāvāda*)
5. Taking intoxicants (*surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhānā*)

The Eight Precepts These are precepts 1-5 above with the substitution of sexual abstention (*abrahmacariya*) for sexual misconduct, and additionally abstention from:

6. Eating at the wrong time (*vikāla-bhojana*)
7. Dancing, singing, music, watching shows, using garlands, perfumes, cosmetics and personal adornments (*naccagīta-vādita-visūkadassana-mālāgandha-vilepana-dhāraṇa-maṇḍana-vibhūsanaṭṭhānā*)
8. Using high seats or beds (*uccāsayana-mahāsayana*)

The Ten Precepts The Ten Precepts are precepts 1-6 of the Eight Precepts (*aṭṭhaṅgasīla*) plus abstention from the following:

7. Dancing, singing, music and watching shows.
8. Using garlands, perfumes, and personal adornments.
9. Using high seats or beds.
10. Accepting gold or silver.

The Ten Good Paths of Action

1. Abstention from taking life (*pāṇātipāta-veramaṇī*)
2. Abstention from taking what has not been given (*adinnādāna-veramaṇī*)

3. Abstention from sexual misconduct (*kāmesu-micchācāra-veramaṇī*)

4. Abstention from lying (*musāvāda-veramaṇī*)

5. Abstention from slanderous speech (*pisunāya-vācāya-veramaṇī*)

6. Abstention from harsh speech (*pharusāya-vācāya-veramaṇī*)

7. Abstention from idle talk (*samphappalāpā-veramaṇī*)

8. Non-covetousness (*anabhijjhā*)

9. Non-malevolence (*avyāpāda*)

10. Right views (*sammādiṭṭhi*)

The debt these formulations owe to the Short Tract is as follows. The first four of the Five Precepts correspond to items 1-4 of the Short Tract, with the substitution in the third of 'sexual misconduct' (*kāmesu-micchācāra*) for sexual abstinence (*brahmacariya*). These four are supplemented by the introduction of a new item namely the fifth precept which prohibits the use of intoxicants. The Five Precepts are intended for the laity and it is therefore not surprising to find that sexual abstinence is not required and that intoxicants are prohibited. The Eight Precepts are compiled from the Five Precepts by the addition of Short Tract items 9, 10 and 11 combined, and 12. The Ten Precepts are compiled from the Five Precepts by the addition of Short Tract items 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. The Ten Precepts are observed by pious laity and by novices (*sāmaṇera*) prior to receiving the higher ordination (*upasasampadā*).

> The major preceptual codes of Buddhism are formulated directly on the Short Tract. The Short Tract is in turn based upon the conduct of Gotama the *Samaṇa*. To observe the precepts, therefore, is to model one's behaviour on that of the Buddha.

The Ten Good Paths of Action consist of the first seven items of the Short Tract with the addition of three new items. It is not hard to see the rationale for this addition. The seven items of the Short Tract can be divided into two groups: items 1–3 relate to bodily acts while items 4-7 relate to speech acts. The final supplementary group of three relates to mental attitudes and is synonymous with the three 'cardinal virtues' (*kusala-mūla*). The inclusion of the final three items changes this from a restrictive code of rules to a more positive formulation of moral teachings. The Five Precepts also make reference to acts of body, speech and mind, although in a less direct way; thus items 1–3 relate to the body, item 4 to speech, and item 5 to the mind, since intoxicants cause be a cause of negligence (*pamādaṭṭhāna*).

From the above we see that the major preceptual codes of Buddhism, which are common to the Small and Large Vehicles, are formulated directly on the Short Tract. The Short Tract is in turn based upon the conduct of Gotama the *Samaṇa*. To observe the precepts, therefore, is to model one's behaviour on that of the Buddha. The above four formulations of precepts all compress the Three Tracts*:* we turn now to one which expands them.

The *Pātimokkha* Another list of precepts may be found in the Pātimokkha which is incorporated into the monastic disciplinary code or Vinaya. Whereas *sīla* is a form of internalised self-discipline, Vinaya is a system of externally imposed constraints on behaviour. Theravādin monks follow 227 rules and nuns 311. The Vinaya provides background information on how each rule came to be introduced and details exceptions and modifications that were made due to new circumstances over the course of time. In these accounts, the Buddha is depicted as the author of the rules although some of them date from after his death.

Sections of the Vinaya are a bit like the transcript of a court hearing, or the notes a scribe might make when recording the essential points of a case and the verdict handed down. The style is terse and legalistic, but commentators subsequently added their reflections and conjectures to cast light on obscure points. These writings mark the beginnings of a legal tradition that takes the early moral teachings as its basis and seeks to develop principles of jurisprudence to resolve questions of guilt and innocence. A modern commentary on the rules by the Venerable Thanissaro (Thanissaro 2013) is available online.

The monastic precepts of the Vinaya are a combination of moral precepts with additional regulations designed to encourage self-discipline, and to ensure the smooth running of monastic communities which were rapidly increasing in size. Of key importance was the public face of the *saṅgha* and its status in the eyes of the lay community. A *saṅgha* riven with dissent and lax in discipline would bring the teachings of the Buddha into disrepute and jeopardize the economic support of the laity on which the monasteries depended. In this respect, the fortnightly *posadha* ceremony at which all resident monks assemble to hear the rules recited functions as a public affirmation of the collective moral purity of the community. The most serious category of monastic offences, the four 'Offences of Defeat' (*pārājika*), are a reformulation of the *Short Tract* items 1-4 in a form more pertinent to monastic life. The correspondence is as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: The four *Pārājika* compared to the Short Tract

Pārājika	**Short Tract**
1. Sexual intercourse	3. Unchastity (*abrahmacariya*)
2. Theft of a certain value	2. Taking what is not given (*adinnādāna*)
3. Killing a human being	1. Taking life (*pāṇātipāta*)
4. Lying about spiritual accomplishments	4. Telling lies (*musāvāda*)

Many of the *Pātimokkha* rules are without a corresponding rule in the Three Tracts. In part this is because they relate to different lifestyles – that of the wandering *samaṇa* versus that of the sedentary monk (*bhikkhu*). Into the life of the latter additional concerns intrude such as the construction of dwellings, the wearing of robes of a standard type, relationships with the laity and other members of the Order, and so forth. Rules concerning all these things are to be found in the Vinaya, reflecting the adjustment to new circumstances in the historical growth of monasticism. Whereas the Three Tracts define the conduct of Gotama as wandering *samaṇa*, the Vinaya regulates the conduct of the *saṅgha* as a settled community.

3 *Sīla* in the Eightfold Path

So far, we have looked at the most basic meaning of *sīla* as a moral precept, and the combination of individual precepts into preceptual formulae. This is the first of two senses of the term. It will be recalled from the previous chapter that *sīla* also features as a component of the Eightfold Path, and this is another important meaning of *sīla*. Buddhaghosa recognises both senses when he provides an etymological explanation of the meaning of *sīla*. He relates *sīla* to *sīlana* in the sense of 'composing.' This in turn is defined as 'coordinating' (*samādhāna*) or 'upholding' (*upadhāraṇa*):

> It is virtue (*sīla*) in the sense of composing. What is this composing? It is either a coordinating, meaning non-inconsistency of bodily actions, etc. due to virtue; or it is an upholding, in the sense of being a basis owing to its serving as a foundation for profitable states. (Vism 1.19)

Sīla 'coordinates' by ensuring propriety in conduct in accordance with the precepts, and it 'upholds' by being the foundation of the Eightfold Path.

The thirteen discourses of the Collection lay out the path to nirvana as a step-by-step program. As Saddhatissa observes:

> Moreover, if anything is to be argued from the order of the arrangement of the suttas in the *Dīgha Nikāya* and at least the first thirteen of these, perhaps the first sixteen, are amongst the earliest of the Discourses that have come down to us, it appears that they were arranged by the compilers in an order which would produce a cumulative account of the Buddha's teachings. (Saddhatissa 1987, 53)

The second *sutta* of the Long Discourses, the Discourse on the Fruits of the Religious Life (Sāmaññaphala Sutta), incorporates the *sīlas* into an overall scheme or way of life directed towards the soteriological goal of nirvana. We find there a sequence of thirteen stages leading through the *sīlas* to the practice of the four absorptions (*jhānas*) and thence to arahantship with the destruction of the defilements known as 'outflows' (*āsava*).

The division of the thirteen stages into three sections can be seen evolving in the *Collection* in the following manner. The first *sutta* of the Long Discourses (The Discourse on Brahma's Net) lists the *sīlas* in their three tracts; the second, the Fruits of the Religious Life, includes the *sīlas* in its scheme of the thirteen stages towards enlightenment but without further division; the third, the Discourse to Ambaṭṭha, introduces a threefold classification of the (by now sixteen) stages. The Discourse to Ambaṭṭha speaks first of perfection in two dimensions, namely knowledge (*vijjā*) and conduct (*caraṇa*). 'The one who is perfect in knowledge and conduct', says the Buddha, 'is supreme among gods and men' (DN i.99:118). However, when Ambaṭṭha asks him to expand on the nature of that knowledge and conduct the Buddha introduces a threefold classification into Morality (*sīla*), Conduct (*caraṇa*) and Knowledge (*vijjā*).

The sixth *sutta,* the Discourse to Mahāli, mentions the Eightfold Path for the first time, and the Eightfold Path is mentioned again in the eighth *sutta,* the Lion's Roar to Kassapa (DN i.165:153) where a threefold division of the stages to enlightenment is given (DN i.171-3:154f). Here the division is into Morality (*sīla*), Mind (*citta*) and Wisdom (*paññā*). The short Discourse to Subha introduces for the first time the three stages of *Sīla, Samādhi* and *Paññā.* This *sutta* is recited by Ānanda shortly after the death of the Buddha (DN i.204:171). It was given when Subha, a young man from a village near Sāvatthi posed a question to Ānanda about the Buddha's teachings. The Venerable Ānanda replied: 'Subha, there were three divisions of things

which the Lord praised, and with which he aroused, exhorted and established people. Which three? The division of Ariyan morality, the division of Ariyan concentration, and the division of Ariyan wisdom. These were the three divisions of things which the Lord praised' (DN i.207:173).

Let us list these twofold and threefold divisions of the Eightfold Path showing the number of the *sutta* in which they occur in brackets:

Table 4.2: Twofold and threefold divisions of the Eightfold Path

Twofold	Threefold
Caraṇa and *Vijjā* (DN 3)	*Sīla, Caraṇa, Vijjā* (DN 3)
Sīla and *Paññā* (DN 4)	*Sīla, Citta, Paññā* (DN 8)
	Sīla, Samādhi, Paññā (DN 10)

It will be seen that of the thirteen *suttas* of the Collection only four (DN 3 occurs twice in the above list) offer any classification of the stages to arahantship, and there is no uniformity of terminology. In particular, the nomenclature of the middle stage when specified is different in each case. It is variously called *Citta*, *Caraṇa*, and *Samādhi.*Apparently, the individual factors of the Path are not so important as the general categories which contain them. This may be seen from the Lesser Discourse of the Miscellany (Cūḷavedalla Sutta) in the conversation between the nun Dhammadinnā, who speaks in the presence of and with the approval of the Buddha, and the lay follower Visākha.

> But, lady, is the Noble Eightfold Path composite or incomposite? The Noble Eightfold Path, friend Visākha, is composite. Now, lady, are the three categories arranged in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path or is the Noble Eightfold Path arranged in accordance with the three categories? Friend Visākha, the three categories are not arranged in accordance with the Noble Eightfold Path, but the Noble Eightfold Path is arranged in accordance with the three categories. (MN i.300f:398)

It would seem to be the broad categories of the Path that are of primary importance rather than the eight individual items. The three categories indicate the areas in which spiritual development is required while their contents sharpen the picture by pinpointing specific practices or prohibitions.

Similarly, the path to arahantship in thirteen stages can be conceived of as personal development in certain key areas. In the settled formulation these are three – Morality (*sīla*), Meditation (*samādhi*) and Wisdom (*paññā*) - but it is also possible to regard these spheres of perfection as binary, that is to say as founded upon Knowledge (*vijjā*) and Conduct (*caraṇa*), or Morality (*sīla*) and Wisdom (*paññā*).

> The state of perfection attained by those who follow the path to Arahantship is best understood as binary, namely as the perfection of morality (*sīla)* together with the perfection of wisdom (*paññā).*

The ambiguity centres on the middle section, Meditation (*samādhi),* and perhaps this is because meditation is a technique for the development of the other two (morality and wisdom). If this is correct, the final perfection attained by those who follow the path to arahantship is best understood in terms of a binary model in the manner described in the Discourse to Soṇadaṇḍa.

The Discourse to Soṇadaṇḍa

The Discourse to Soṇadaṇḍa (DN 4) helps clarify the content of the final good and describes the symbiotic relationship between *sīla* and *paññā.* The discourse, which we will consider again in Chapter 6, relates how Soṇadaṇḍa the Brahman has been led by the Buddha to define the essential qualities of a true Brahman, and concludes that there are only two such qualities, namely virtue (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The Buddha then inquires whether a man will still be a Brahman if either of these two qualities is left out. Soṇadaṇḍa replies as follows:

> No, Gotama. For wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world. Just as one hand washes the other, or one foot the other, so wisdom is purified by morality and this combination is called the highest thing in the world. (DN i.124:131)

The Buddha signifies his assent to this and repeats the first part of Soṇadaṇḍa's statement almost verbatim. He then specifies in what virtue and wisdom consist, namely in following the path to arahantship which is

here divided into the two components of *sīla* and *paññā*. We see from the Buddha's statement that these are the necessary and sufficient conditions of a true Brahman. The conclusion to be drawn from the passage is that moral excellence is an essential dimension of human perfection. A point to note is that the Buddha does not stipulate *samādhi* in his conception of the essential qualities of 'true Brahman,' or as we would say 'a virtuous person'. He includes it as part of the path but does not specify it as part of the goal.

The Sequence of the Path

We saw that the Eightfold Path has three divisions, namely *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. The fact that the Eightfold Path begins with *sīla* is sometimes taken to mean that morality is only a preliminary stage. As pointed out in Chapter 2, this is a misunderstanding. It would be more correct to say that the Eightfold Path begins with *sīla* but ends with *sīla* and *paññā*. *Sīla* is the starting point since human nature is so constituted that moral discipline (*sīla*) facilitates correct understanding (*paññā*). Until correct attitudes habits and dispositions have been inculcated it is easy to fall prey to speculative views and opinions of all kinds, such as the 62 false views listed in the Discourse on Brahma's Net. This does not mean there is a direct line leading through *sīla* to *paññā*, at which point *sīla* is left behind. No: morality is taken up first but constantly cultivated alongside insight until the two fuse in the existential realisation of selflessness. We may say that *paññā* is the cognitive realisation of selflessness (*anattā*) while *sīla* is its affective realisation.

In the Pali canon this scheme of personal development is often depicted as a series of stages or hurdles. This metaphor can be misunderstood if it is not remembered that each of the stages is part of a cumulative development. Each stage develops out of and includes the previous ones. As Gethin notes, the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo*) 'is at once where one wishes to arrive at, and the way one must go to get there. For the destination is not exactly something different from the journey; where one arrives is only the consummation of the way one has come' (Gethin 1992, 207).

Changing the metaphor from one of travel to organic growth, we could say that the happiness of arahantship is a condition that evolves, a bit like the way a flower blossoms or fruit ripens. As the Buddha says, 'penetration to final knowledge occurs by gradual training, gradual activity, and gradual practice, not abruptly' (AN iv.201:1143). Viewed in this way, the Buddha's enlightenment was a process rather than an event. This process reached its maturation in the thirty-fifth year of his last existence. While the sources suggest a significant 'eureka' moment on that occasion, this is best seen

as the culmination of an ever-deepening epistemological grasp of truth (achieved through *paññā*) accompanied by an increasingly refined moral sensibility (achieved through *sīla*). The sentiment is echoed by Saddhatissa, who underlines the fact that this continuum of perfection is *internal* to the Eightfold Path:

> The ultimate ideal aim which may serve as the ultimate standard of right conduct, relates, according to Buddhist thought, to the supramundane or *lokuttara* state, and the connection between the moralities of everyday life and this *lokuttara* state is one which is entirely covered by the Buddha's teachings. It is, in fact, that which is known to Buddhists as *marga, magga,* the Path, the Road, along which each person must travel for himself beginning with the practice of the common moralities up to the supramundane state beyond good and evil. From this point of view Buddhism can be said to provide the complete ethical study (Saddhatissa 1987, 18f)

We will consider in Chapter 8 what is meant by a 'state beyond good and evil'. Nevertheless, it is clear from the above statement that although there is a sense in which the Path involves a journey, it may be more helpful to think of it as a transformation. The Eightfold Path is like a project one participates in, and by participating in the Eightfold Path one participates in those values, excellences or perfections which are constitutive of awakened well-being, namely morality (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*). As the Eightfold Path is followed the practitioner participates more and more in the supramundane (*lokuttara*)*;* both the goal and the path which leads to it are *lokuttara.* 'Just as the Ganges and the Yamuna merge and flow along united,' says the Buddha, 'so too do *nibbāna* and the Path' (DN ii.223:302). Again, we read that the holy life 'merges in Nibbāna, culminates in Nibbāna, ends in Nibbāna' (DN i.304:403). The commentators make the same point more concisely when they tell us that 'awakening is the path' (*bodhī ti maggo*).[1]

> Since the path and the goal are one and the same, nirvana can be understood as the process of gradually cultivating moral virtue (*sīla*) and epistemic virtue (*paññā*).

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[1] PS i.54; Vin-A 139.

4 Summary

In this chapter we have seen that *sīla* circumscribes the conduct of the Gotama the *Samaṇa,* and that the description of the Buddha's behaviour encapsulated in the Three Tracts, and particularly the Short Tract, becomes the blueprint for Buddhist preceptual formulae. The Buddha's *sīla,* or moral perfection, becomes an essential goal for all who aspire to his status, and *sīla* is incorporated into the foundations of the Buddhist soteriological programme. The settled formulation of this emerges in the three divisions (*khandhas*) of the Eightfold Path. Only by practising all three does one become a Perfected One (*arahant*) (AN i.231f:318f).

5 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- *Sīla* is the term that corresponds most closely to what in the West is referred to as 'ethics' or 'morality.' The equivalence, however, is not exact.
- The first thirteen *suttas* of the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya) are known as the Sīlakkhandhavagga (the 'Collection') and contain a stereotyped passage on *sīla* with three tracts in order of length. These stipulate actions of various kinds that Gotama the *Samaṇa* refrains from performing.
- The Three Tracts are the foundation for the moral codes of both laity and monastics.
- The Five Precepts are the primary code of moral conduct for the laity. This list is extended to lists of Eight and Ten Precepts, and Ten Good Paths of Action.
- The *Pātimokkha* is a disciplinary code for monastics containing 227 rules for monks and 311 for nuns (the numbers vary for different Buddhist schools). The four most serious offences are the Four *Pārājika* which are modelled on the first four of the Five Precepts.
- *Sīla* is also the name given to the first division of the Eightfold Path. It includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood.
- The Eightfold Path is usually listed as containing three divisions (Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom) but sometimes only two (Morality and Wisdom).

Discussion Questions

1. What is the meaning of *sīla*?
2. Why do the Three Tracts on *sīla* describe the conduct of Gotama the *Samaṇa* in such detail?
3. Why does Buddhism have so many different lists of moral precepts?
4. Why do monks and nuns have to follow so many rules?
5. Is the Vinaya simply an extended version of the Five Precepts?
6. Which is more important: the eight items of the Eightfold Path or the three divisions of Morality, Meditation, and Wisdom?
7. Can Morality (*sīla*) and Wisdom (*paññā*) be cultivated independently?

Further Reading

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5 Worldly Well-being

1 In this Chapter

The practice of *sīla* has a twofold effect. First, by performing virtuous actions one's own virtue increases. The more we practice a virtue like generosity the easier and more spontaneous it becomes. The second effect, according to Buddhism, is that virtuous deeds produce merit (*puñña*) which manifests in the form of material benefits in this and future lives. The nature of these worldly benefits – which we have termed 'prudential goods' or 'welfare' – is the subject of the present chapter. We begin by providing a listing of the main formulations of prudential good drawn from the Numerical Discourses (Aṅguttara Nikāya) of the Pali canon. This is followed by a review of some of the items to help understand how and why Buddhism values them. We conclude by providing a sixfold classification of prudential good.

2 Introduction

The practice of *sīla* is said to bring many benefits. In the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta (DN 16) the Buddha addresses a group of householders and specifies five advantages to the practice of *sīla*.

> And, householders, there are these five advantages to one of good morality and of success in morality. What are they?
> 1) In the first place, through careful attention to his affairs he gains much wealth.
> 2) In the second place, he gets a good reputation for morality and good conduct.
> 3) In the third place, whatever assembly he approaches, whether of Khattiyas, Brahmins, householders or ascetics, he does so with confidence and assurance.

4) In the fourth place, he dies unconfused.

5) In the fifth place, after death, at the breaking-up of the body, he arises in a good place, a heavenly world. These are the five advantages to one of good morality, and of success in morality. (DN ii.86:236f)

We see that the Buddha is addressing lay followers here, and perhaps for this reason specifies the benefits of *sīla* in worldly terms. He mentions wealth, a good reputation, confidence, an unconfused mind at death, and a heavenly rebirth. Another common formula speaks of worldly goods in terms of 'gain, honour, and renown' (*lābha, sakkāra, siloka*) (e.g. MN i.192:286), or as things that contribute to the 'benefit, welfare and happiness' (*atthāya, hitāya, sukhāya*) of oneself and society at large (e.g. DN iii.211:480). While we have described these things as 'worldly' goods, this does not mean they are enjoyed only in this world. A heavenly rebirth is considered one of the most important benefits of moral conduct, as we see from item five in the list above.

We saw in our earlier discussion of moral teachings that these worldly or prudential goods are thought to be the materialized product of good karma or 'merit' (*puñña*). The aim of the present chapter is to arrive at a clearer understanding of what prudential good consists in. We will do this by first itemising the substantive forms of prudential good found in early sources before reviewing some of the chief prudential goods at greater length to understand why Buddhism values them.

References to prudential good are ubiquitous in Buddhist sources, often occurring in stock lists or formulations. To keep the discussion to a manageable size we will produce a list of goods drawn solely from the Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN). The reason for choosing the AN is that it contains the largest number of *suttas* concerned with lay people (161 in total), and prudential goods are generally thought to have greater relevance to the lay person than the renunciate (Bodhi 2012, 36).

3 Formulations of Prudential Good

The *suttas* of the AN contain numerous formulations of human goods, both of a moral and prudential nature. These are often paired with their opposing evils: the good of wealth, for example, is opposed by the evil of poverty, and pleasure is opposed by pain. Below is a selection of the most prominent formulations of prudential goods (and evils) arranged in order of the number of items they contain, beginning with the most comprehensive.

- **Ten** things 'wished for, desired, agreeable, and rarely gained in the world' are: (1) wealth; (2) beauty; (3) health; (4) virtuous behaviour; (5) celibacy; (6) friends; (7) learning; (8) wisdom; (9) good qualities (*dhammā*); and (10) rebirth in heaven (AN v.135:1429).

- It is said that by growing in **ten** ways, a noble disciple 'absorbs the essence and the best of this life.' He grows in (1) fields and land; (2) wealth and grain; (3) wives and children; (4) slaves, workers, and servants; (5) livestock; (6) faith; (7) virtuous behaviour; (8) learning; (9) generosity; and (10) wisdom (AN v.137:1430).

- The '**eight** worldly conditions around which the world revolves,' are gain and loss, disrepute and fame, blame and praise, and happiness and suffering (AN ii.189:565; iv.156f:1116).

- The immoral person when reborn as a human being suffers **seven** evils according to the precepts broken. (1) A short life span is the result of killing; (2) loss of wealth is the result of stealing; (3) enmity and rivalry are the result of sexual misconduct; (4) false accusations are the result of false speech; (5) being divided from one's friends is the result of divisive speech; (6) hearing disagreeable sounds is the result of harsh speech; and (7) becoming mad is the result of drinking liquor and wine (AN v.247:1175f).

- The **seven** misfortunes wished upon an enemy are that he may be: (1) ugly; (2) sleep badly; (3) not succeed; (4) not be wealthy; (5) not be famous; (6) have no friends; and (7) be reborn in a bad destination (AN iv.94f:1066f).

- A person who gives a gift out of faith receives **five** benefits. (1) He becomes rich and handsome; (2) is obeyed by his sons, wives, slaves, servants, and workers; (3) receives timely benefits in abundance; (4) enjoys the five kinds of sensual pleasures; and (5) no damage comes to his property (AN v.172f:763).

- **Five** things wished for in the world are (1) long life (*āyu*); (2) beauty (*vaṇṇa*); (3) happiness (*sukha*); (4) fame (*yasa*); and (5) the heavens (*saggā*) (AN iii.47:667f).

- A generous disciple when reborn among gods or humans surpasses one who lacks generosity in **five** ways: in (1) life span; (2) beauty; (3) happiness; (4) fame; and (5) authority. If he goes forth as a monk, he receives special robes; alms food; lodgings; medicines; and agreeable treatment from his fellows (AN iii.33:653).

- There are **five** directly visible fruits of giving. (1) The donor is dear and agreeable to many people; (2) is resorted to by good persons;

(3) acquires a good reputation; (4) approaches any assembly with confidence; and (5) is reborn in a good destination (AN iii.39:659).

- The **five** benefits (*ānisaṃsa*) of *sīla* are (1) wealth; (2) a good reputation; (3) confidence in assemblies; (4) an unconfused death; and (5) rebirth in heaven (AN iii.253:824). Conversely, one who fails in morality loses much wealth; is the subject of a bad report; approaches assemblies timid and disconcerted; dies confused; and is reborn in a plane of misery (AN iii.252f:823f).

- **Five** benefits (*ānisaṃsa*) of good conduct (*sucarita*) are that (1) the moral person does not censure himself; (2) is praised by the wise; (3) acquires a good reputation; (4) dies unconfused; and (5) is reborn in heaven. The five dangers in misconduct (*ducarita*) are the opposite (AN iii.267:835).

- **Five** accomplishments (*sampadā*) are accomplishments in (1) relatives; (2) wealth; (3) health; (4) virtuous behaviour; and (5) views. These contrast with disasters (*vyasana*) in the same five areas (AN iii.147:744).

- A *bhikkhu* who acquires four powers (wisdom, energy, blamelessness, and sustaining a favourable relationship) is said to transcend **five** fears: (1) fear of loss of livelihood; (2) fear of disrepute; (3) fear of timidity in assemblies; (4) fear of death; and (5) fear of a bad destination (AN i.363:1254f).

- **Four** things wished for in the world are (1) wealth; (2) fame; (3) a long life; and (4) rebirth in a heavenly world (AN ii.66:449).

- There are **four** accomplishments (*sampadā*) applicable to lay-followers: (1) initiative; (2) protection; (3) good friendship; and (4) balanced living. These are explained as skill in one's trade or profession; the protection of wealth; association with the virtuous; and living prudently within one's means (AN iv.282:1194f).

We see that the AN enumerates many goods, frequently in the form of short lists. Often, these include a combination of moral and prudential goods, and the last item also mentions technical skill in one's trade or profession. If we eliminate moral goods and technical skills, there are some fourteen or so prudential goods that feature repeatedly. They are:

- a good rebirth
- wealth (including financial and material assets)
- pleasure
- friendship

- good family and social relations
- longevity
- health
- beauty
- power
- authority
- honour
- fame
- reputation
- praise

It would take us too far afield to consider all of these, so below we comment on a selection of the most prominent, supplementing the testimony of the AN with references from elsewhere in the canon.

> There are some fourteen prudential goods that feature prominently in the sources. They are: a good rebirth, wealth (including financial and material assets), pleasure, friendship, good family and social relations, longevity, health, beauty, power, authority, honour, fame, reputation, and praise.

4 Wealth

Wealth (*bhoga*) is one of the most commonly mentioned prudential goods (Sizemore and Swearer 1990). It is considered good fortune to be reborn in an affluent family, one 'rich, with great wealth and property, with abundant gold and silver, with abundant treasures and belongings, with abundant wealth and grain' (AN ii.86:467f). Such affluence is often associated with the *Cakkavatti*, who is described as 'rich, of great wealth and resources, having a full treasury of gold and silver' as well as 'all sorts of goods' and a granary 'full of corn' (DN iii.163:452). Why is wealth so prized, and what are the benefits it brings?

The 'five utilizations of wealth' (*pañca bhogānaṃ ādiyā*) are that through 'righteous wealth righteously gained', the noble disciple makes himself, his parents, wife and children, slaves, workers and servants happy, and properly maintains them in happiness. He does the same for friends and companions, as well as making provision against losses that might arise. He also makes

oblations and offers alms to ascetics. The householder who uses his wealth in these five ways 'remains firm in the noble Dhamma' (AN iii.45f:665f).

We also learn that while wealth has five benefits, it also has five dangers, namely fire, water, kings, thieves, and the risk of disappointing heirs. It is pointed out that by contrast the virtues of faith, virtuous behaviour, moral shame, moral dread, learning, generosity, and wisdom are immune to those dangers (AN iii.259:829). These virtues are declared to be the 'wealth' of a Buddha (DN iii.163:452). The contrast reveals a key difference between prudential goods and the virtues: the former, as 'goods of fortune,' are subject to the whims of fate whereas the latter are not. The Buddha also speaks of two kinds of wealth: material wealth and the wealth of the Dhamma and concludes that the second is superior (AN i.92:182). In the same vein, the Dhammapada (Dhp 204) reminds us that 'contentment is the best wealth' (*santuṭṭhiparamaṃ dhanaṃ*).

It is said that a layperson can enjoy four kinds of happiness, the first of which is the happiness of ownership:

> And what, householder, is the happiness of ownership? Here, a clansman has acquired wealth by energetic striving, amassed by the strength of his arms, earned by the sweat of his brow, righteous wealth righteously gained. When he thinks, 'I have acquired wealth by energetic striving . . . righteously gained,' he experiences happiness and joy. This is called the happiness of ownership (AN ii.69:452).

The second kind of happiness is the happiness of enjoyment, whereby 'a clansman enjoys his wealth and does meritorious deeds'; and the third is 'the happiness of freedom from debt' whereby 'a clansman has no debts to anyone, whether large or small' (AN ii.69:453). Lack of wealth can cause much suffering, and we learn that 'poverty is suffering in the world; getting into debt . . . having to pay interest . . . being reproved . . . prosecution . . . imprisonment is suffering in the world' (AN iii.351f:914). Individuals who had renounced the world were in danger of being drawn back because of reflections of the following kind: 'My family has wealth. I can both enjoy that wealth and do meritorious deeds. Let me now give up the training and revert to the lower life so that I can both enjoy that wealth and do meritorious deeds' (AN ii.125:504).

As noted, wealth can be sought and used both righteously and unrighteously: the one who uses wealth righteously 'makes himself happy and pleased, and he shares the wealth and does meritorious deeds. And he uses

his wealth without being tied to it, infatuated with it, and blindly absorbed in it, seeing the danger in it and understanding the escape' (AN v.178:1458). The Dhammapada informs us that 'Riches kill the fool, but not those who are about to go to the far shore' (Dhp 355).

> Wealth is not inherently incompatible with virtue. It can be sought and used both righteously and unrighteously.

Wealth is therefore not inherently incompatible with virtue. This is confirmed when the Buddha speaks of three kinds of persons: one is blind, another is one-eyed, and a third is two-eyed. The two-eyed person is one who 'has the kind of eye with which one can acquire wealth not yet acquired, and he also has the kind of eye with which one can know wholesome and unwholesome qualities, blameworthy and blameless qualities, inferior and superior qualities, dark and bright qualities with their counterparts' (AN i.129:224). Anāthapiṇḍika would seem to be an example of such a person. Anāthapiṇḍika was a wealthy banker and generous donor to the *saṅgha* who achieved the status of a stream-winner (*sotāpanna*). The failure to share wealth, by contrast, leads to one's downfall (Sn 122).

5 Goods of the Body

The goods of longevity, health, and beauty are often mentioned together, and given their common association with the body we will discuss them under this rubric.

The Dhammapada (Dhp 109) speaks of four good things (*dhammā*) that accrue to one who reveres and serves the elders, namely long life, beauty, happiness, and power. A Wheel-turning Monarch is said to enjoy four kinds of success (*iddhi*): he is handsome, long-lived, free from illness, and dear and agreeable to brahmins and householders (MN iii.176:1026f). It is said that a noble disciple who donates food gives 'life, beauty, happiness and strength' to the recipient, and also partakes of these things in either human or divine form in return (AN ii.64:447; iii.42:62).

By contrast, a person 'without expectation' in the world is described as 'ugly, unsightly, dwarfish, with much illness – blind, crippled, lame or paralyzed' (AN i.107:207). We are warned against over-attachment to bodily goods, and three kinds of 'intoxication' (*mada*) are mentioned with respect to youth, health, and life (AN i.146:241). Three perils are said to 'separate mother and son,' namely old age, illness, and death (AN iii.179:272). Death curtails the enjoyment of all goods along with the opportunity to practice

virtue and is an obstacle (*antarāya*) because one departs the world without having abandoned 'bad unwholesome qualities' (AN iv.320:1222). Forest-dwelling monks were particularly aware of the ever-present risk of death from snakes and scorpions, wild animals, hoodlums, and wild spirits (AN iii.101:709; iii.306:878f; iv.320:1222). The achievement of a human rebirth, as well as a blessing, also provides a unique opportunity to practice Dhamma. This suggests that when appropriately acquired prudential goods support the pursuit of moral goods.

Good health – both physical and psychological – is highly prized. According to Dhp 204 'the greatest of all gains is health' (*ārogyaparamā lābhā*) (cf. MN i.508:613). 'Endowment with unimpaired [sense] faculties' is said to be 'rare in the world' (AN iii.441:981). The Buddha recommended eating at a single session and avoiding eating at night because 'By so doing, I am free from illness and affliction, and I enjoy health, strength, and a comfortable abiding' (MN i.437:542; i.473:577). One of the four things wished for in the world is 'May I live long and enjoy a long life-span' (AN ii.66:449). This was a benefit the Buddha enjoyed, and he reputedly possessed the power to extend his lifespan for an eon (DN ii.115:251f) despite his health deteriorating towards the end. While the Abhidhamma has little to say about physical well-being it recognises three elements of materiality connected to bodily well-being, as Karunadasa points out:

> The importance of physical health is expressly recognized in the Theravāda Abhidhamma as well. Among the many basic factors of materiality recognized by the Ābhidhammikas, three are called corporeal lightness (*rūpassa lahutā*), corporeal malleability (*rūpassa mudutā*), and corporeal wieldiness (*rūpassa kammaññatā*). These three represent the physical body when it is healthy and amenable to work. (Karunadasa 2017, 67)

One of the five dangers for a monk who insults and disparages his fellow monks is that he 'contracts a severe illness' (AN iii.252:823). Health, as well as intrinsically good ('the greatest of all gains'), is instrumentally necessary to support the rigours of the monastic life. One of the desirable qualities for religious training is that the candidate should be 'free from illness and affliction, possessing a good digestion that is neither too cool nor too warm but medium and able to bear the strain of striving' (MN iii.95:707). While Buddhist monks are portrayed as robust and strong, ascetics of other orders are described by King Pasenadi as 'lean, wretched, unsightly, jaundiced, with veins standing out on their limbs, such that people would not want to look at them again' (MN ii.121:730).

> 'Goods of the body' include health, strength, longevity, and beauty.

Beauty is repeatedly mentioned as a value. In the AN, the Brahmin Vaccha-gotta observes that 'Gotama's faculties are tranquil, and the colour of his skin is pure and bright' (AN i.181:273). Elsewhere, we hear that the Buddha's skin is smooth, and that he has an upright bearing and 'Brahmā-like voice' (MN ii.137:746). These are three of the thirty-two marks of a superman (DN 30: MN 91). Beauty is not exclusive to the awakened: the eldest son of a head-anointed *khattiya* king is said to possess five attributes, the second being that he is 'handsome, attractive, graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion' (AN iii.151:747). Queen Mallikā asks the Buddha why some women are 'ugly, ill-formed, and unsightly' whereas others are 'beautiful, attractive, and graceful, possessing supreme beauty of complexion'. The Buddha links this disparity to a character trait, namely a propensity to anger (AN ii.203:577f).

Despite the importance of physical appearance, the Buddha criticizes the suggestion that monks should lead the spiritual life to attain 'celestial beauty' in the *deva* world (AN i.115:213). Similarly, it is said that a monk should not consume food for the sake of 'physical beauty and attractiveness' but only for the support and maintenance of the body (AN ii.40:427; MN ii.138:747).

6 Friendship

Of all the prudential goods, there appears to be one that enjoys pride of place. This is 'good friendship' (*kalyāṇamittatā*), which, as can be seen from the Buddha's definition below, is valued for the support it provides for the cultivation of virtue.

> And what is good friendship? Here, in whatever village or town a clansman lives, he associates with householders or their sons — whether young but of mature virtue, or old and of mature virtue — who are accomplished in faith, virtuous behaviour, generosity, and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussions with them. Insofar as they are accomplished in faith, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in faith; insofar as they are accomplished in virtuous behaviour, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in virtuous behaviour; insofar as they are accomplished in generosity, he

emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in generosity; insofar as they are accomplished in wisdom, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in wisdom. This is called good friendship. (AN iv.282f:1194f.)

As stated above, 'good friendship' is defined as association with the virtuous and the emulation of their accomplishments in faith, virtuous behaviour, generosity, and wisdom (AN iv.323:1224). Friendship is central to the religious life, and the Buddha goes so far as to declare good friendship 'the whole of the spiritual life' (SN v.2:1524). We learn there is 'no single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as good friendship' (AN i.14:101). Anuruddha describes his relationship with monastic colleagues in the following terms:

> It is a gain for me, it is a great gain for me that I am living with such companions in the holy life. I maintain bodily acts of loving-kindness towards these venerable ones both openly and privately; I maintain verbal acts of loving-kindness towards them both openly and privately; I maintain mental acts of loving-kindness towards them both openly and privately. I consider: 'Why should I not set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do?' Then I set aside what I wish to do and do what these venerable ones wish to do. We are different in body, venerable sir, but one in mind. (MN iii.156:1011)

King Pasenadi describes the monks as 'living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes' (MN ii.120f:730). Monks are advised to associate with a friend who possesses seven factors: '(1) He gives what is hard to give. (2) He does what is hard to do. (3) He patiently endures what is hard to endure. (4) He reveals his secrets to you. (5) He preserves your secrets. (6) He does not forsake you when you are in trouble. (7) He does not roughly despise you' (AN iv.31:1021f).

> Friendship is central to the religious life, and the Buddha goes so far as to declare good friendship 'the whole of the spiritual life'.

Seven further good qualities of a friend are mentioned: '(1) He is pleasing and agreeable; (2) he is respected and (3) esteemed; (4) he is a speaker; (5) he patiently endures being spoken to; (6) he gives deep talks; and (7) he

does not enjoin one to do what is wrong' (AN iv.32:1022f). It is said that when a *bhikkhu* has good friends this is 'the first proximate cause for the development of the aids to enlightenment' (AN iv.357:1249), as well as being 'a quality that serves as a protector' (AN v.23:1355). 'Good friendship' is one of six qualities that lead to the non-decline of a *bhikkhu* (AN iii.423:969), and 'When liberation of mind has not occurred,' having good friends is 'the first thing that leads to its maturation' (AN iv.357:1249).

As mentioned, one of the evils an enemy wishes upon an enemy is 'may he have no friends' (AN iv.95:1067). Friendship is threatened by immorality: sexual misconduct leads to 'enmity and rivalry' and divisive speech to being 'divided from one's friends' (AN iv.247:1175). Bad friendship is one of four sources of dissipation, the others being womanizing, drunkenness, and gambling (AN iv.285:1195). When a *bhikkhu* has 'bad friends, bad companions, and bad comrades' he fails in six aspects of his practice, but when he has good friends, he succeeds in the same six areas (AN iii.422:968). We see that the friendship of good people is a powerful incubator of virtue.

Although friendship is a great good, one of the things that paradoxically leads to the non-decline of a *bhikkhu* is that he 'does not bond closely with householders and monastics, socializing in an unfitting manner typical of laypeople, so he does not neglect seclusion but devotes himself to internal serenity of mind' (AN iii.117f:21). Similarly, it is pointed out that a monk who is overly enamoured of company and who 'delights in a group' will not delight in solitude when alone (AN iii.422:968; MN iii.171:972).

7 Pleasure

The term translated as 'pleasure' here is *sukha*. The scope of *sukha* includes both transient pleasures and more enduring states of contentment or satisfaction that might be termed 'happiness'. Steven Collins notes, 'In the Buddhist case it is possible to mark the distinction between *sukha* as pleasant feeling and as a broader evaluative term quite precisely. Ordinary sensual happiness, and the happiness engendered by meditation, are said to be matters of feeling, but only up to the third Meditation Level (*jhāna*)' (Collins 1998, 208). Whether as pleasant bodily feeling or loftier spiritual state, however, *sukha* always denotes a subjective experience and can be distinguished from the objective state of well-being referred to as 'nirvana' or 'eudaimonia'.

The sources qualify *sukha* in various ways to bring out its different shades of meaning.[1] Pleasure of a sensual kind (*kāmasukha*) is usually depicted in a negative light due to its unstable and addictive nature. Stern warnings are issued about the pitfalls associated with it. Bhikkhu Bodhi lists the many *suttas* that describe the pitfalls in sensual pleasure in the Introduction to his translation of the Numerical Discourses (Bodhi 2012, 77). Aristotle likewise regards sense pleasures as inferior because they are the kind we share with animals. For this reason, such pleasures are 'characteristic of slaves and beasts' (NE 1118a23-25). He says that people lacking in moderation with respect to such pleasures behave like animals rather than humans, which impedes their pursuit of what is 'fine' or 'noble' (*to kalon*).

Returning to our Buddhist sources, sense pleasures are said to be perilous, suffering, a disease, a boil, a tie, a swamp (AN iii.310f:881f). They are also likened to a whirlpool (AN iii.125:504). Craving for sensual pleasure is the first of the three 'taints' (*āsava*) (AN iii.414:962), and hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure as an end) is rejected as a 'coarse way of practice' (*āgāḷhā paṭipadā*) (AN i.295:372). One passage defines sensual pleasure as 'Any pleasure or joy that arises in dependence on these five objects of sensual pleasure' (AN iv.416:1293). Another source qualifies this by defining sensual pleasure (*kāma*) not as the 'five objects of sensual pleasure' but as 'lustful intention' (*saṅkapparāgo purisassa kāmo*). A verse explains that 'the pretty things in the world' (*citrāni loke*) are not in themselves sensual pleasures: they remain just as they are, but 'the wise remove the desire for them' (*dhīrā vinayanti chanda*) (AN iv.415:960). At the same time, the enjoyment of sensual pleasures is generally seen as acceptable for laymen. Such pleasures are said to be the reward of generous donors who 'delight, rejoice, and enjoy themselves' in Nandana, the Garden of Delight in the *Tāvatiṃsa* heaven (AN iii.40:660).

The grosser forms of sensual pleasure such as the 'five objects of sensual pleasure' (*pañca kāmaguṇā*) can be distinguished from subtler or more elevated forms of satisfaction or contentment. The happiness derived from sensual pleasure (*kāmasukha*), for example, is contrasted with the satisfaction of renunciation (*nekkhammasukha*), and the happiness of the layman is contrasted with that of the one who has gone forth (AN i.80:170). Carnal (*sāmisa*) and spiritual (*nirāmisa*) happiness are distinguished, and happiness based on what is pleasant (*sāta*) is said to be inferior to that based on equanimity (*upekkhā*) (AN i.81:171).

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[1]Steven Collins has provided a summary of the commentarial classifications of *sukha* (Collins 1998, 208).

In conversation with the monk Udāyin, the Buddha contrasts these two kinds of pleasure, speaking first of sensual pleasure: 'Now, Udāyin, the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on these five cords of sensual pleasure are called sensual pleasure - a filthy pleasure, a coarse pleasure, an ignoble pleasure. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should not be pursued, that it should not be developed, that it should not be cultivated, that it should be feared' (MN i.455:557). He compares this unfavourably with the bliss of the fourth *jhāna*: 'This is called the bliss of renunciation, the bliss of seclusion, the bliss of peace, the bliss of enlightenment. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should be pursued, that it should be developed, that it should be cultivated, that it should not be feared' (MN i.455:557).

> The happiness derived from sensual pleasure (*kāmasukha*) is contrasted with the satisfaction of renunciation (*nekkhamma-sukha*), and the happiness of the layman is contrasted with that of the one who has gone forth.

The Buddha contrasts his experience of sense pleasures in his early life when he lived in three palaces, with the delight he experienced after his awakening which 'surpasses divine bliss.' 'Since I delight in that,' he adds, 'I do not envy what is inferior' (MN i.504f:610). After practicing asceticism fruitlessly, the Buddha recalled a time when as a child he sat under a tree watching his father ploughing. This stirred the reflection, 'Why am I afraid of that pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states? I thought: I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states' (MN i.246f:340). The Buddha says that after his awakening he became incapable of indulging in sensual pleasures (AN i.147:241), and thereafter lived the complete and pure celibate life free from the 'seven bonds of sexuality' (*satta methuna saṃyoga*) (AN iv.56:1039). Similarly, a virtuous *bhikkhu* practices 'for disenchantment with sensual pleasures, dispassion towards them, and for their cessation' (AN i.64:156).

As we saw earlier, *sukha* is one of the 'eight worldly conditions' (AN ii.188:565; iv.157:1116), yet Sāriputta states that *nibbāna* is happiness: 'Happiness, friends, is this nibbāna' (*sukhamidaṃ, āvuso, nibbānaṃ*) (AN iv.414:1292). The Buddha, immediately after his awakening, enjoys 'the happiness of release' (*vimutti-sukha*) (Vin 1.1). The MN confirms that 'nibbāna is the greatest bliss' (*nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*) (MN i.508:613; Dhp 203-4), and the Dhammapada speaks of 'the bliss of renunciation (*nekkhamma sukha*) not experienced by the worldling' (Dhp 271-2). The same source

counsels: 'Should a person do good, let him do it again and again. Let him find pleasure therein, for blissful is the accumulation of merit' (*sukho puññassa uccayo*) (Dhp 118). *Udāna* 11 states that the happiness of the senses and of the gods is not worth a sixteenth part of the happiness that arises from the destruction of craving.[2]

The *Majjhima Nikāya* states that someone who keeps the ten precepts experiences pleasure (*sukha*) and joy (*somanassa*) (MN i.315:412), and King Pasenadi provides first-hand testimony of the happiness of the Buddha's followers, observing 'I see bhikkhus smiling and cheerful, sincerely joyful, plainly delighting, their faculties fresh, living at ease, unruffled … abiding with mind [as aloof] as a wild deer's' (MN iii.121:731). We thus see that pleasure (*sukha*) is designated as wholesome or otherwise depending on the source from which it arises. If Aristotle is correct that 'what is noble must be pleasant' (EE 1237a8), it is not surprising that virtuous activity should be accompanied by pleasant feelings in the way described. Due to the operation of *kamma-niyāma* virtue (*kusala*) is always accompanied by prudential good (*puñña*) in the way that fire is accompanied by heat.

8 Post-mortem Destination

We have left this item to last because while often seen as the apogee of prudential good its value consists in being an agglomeration of goods of the kind already mentioned. The value of a heavenly rebirth is that it allows the continued enjoyment of earthly goods in an augmented form. There are no heavenly goods that are not also earthly goods, the difference being one of degree. Thus, one reborn as a *deva* experiences 'a celestial life span, celestial beauty, celestial happiness, celestial glory, and celestial authority' (AN i.115:213). As Collins notes, the happiness of the gods 'is of the same kind as that enjoyed by (gendered and sexual) humans in fortunate circumstances, notably kings, but it is purer and more refined, inclining towards the less physical happinesses of the spiritual life' (Collins 1998, 304).

> The happiness of the gods is of the same kind as that enjoyed by humans in fortunate circumstances, but it is purer and more refined.

Chief among the goods enjoyed in heaven is pleasure, and the pleasure of the heavens is more intense and of longer duration than can be experienced

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[2] *Yañca kāmasukhaṃ loke yañcidaṃ diviyaṃ sukhaṃ taṇhakkhayasukhassete kalaṃ nāgghanti soḷasin'ti* (Udāna 11).

on earth. 'Heavenly sensual pleasures', says the Majjhima Nikāya, 'are more excellent and sublime than human sensual pleasures' (MN i.505:610). It adds 'It is hard to finish describing the happiness of heaven' (MN iii.172:1023). A verse states 'those who desire sensual pleasures rejoice, delighting in the deva world' (AN i.153:247). The gods live 'abounding in happiness' and are described as 'beautiful, ablaze with glory' while 'dwelling for a long time in lofty palaces' (AN ii.34:421). The drawback with heaven, of course, is that it is soteriologically retrograde because there is little incentive to cultivate virtue. For this reason, the gods receive a 'reality check' when they hear the Tathāgata's teaching and are 'filled with fear, a sense of urgency, and terror' (AN ii.33:421).

The various stations of rebirth in Buddhism, from heaven down to hell, are aligned on a graduated scale of welfare. Indeed, it is the degree to which prudential good is present or absent in such realms that makes them what they are. In the case of a human rebirth, a person reborn ugly or infirm in a poor low-caste family is deprived of the goods of appearance, health, wealth, power and authority, whereas one who achieves a fortunate human rebirth is blessed with all of these. Lower down the scale, rebirth in hell is particularly unattractive because one arising there experiences not pleasure but 'afflictive feelings' which are 'exclusively painful' (AN i.122:218). These result from the tortures, described in vivid detail, administered by the 'wardens of hell' (AN i.141:236). In stark contrast to heaven, hell is entirely bereft of prudential good which makes it the unpleasant place it is.
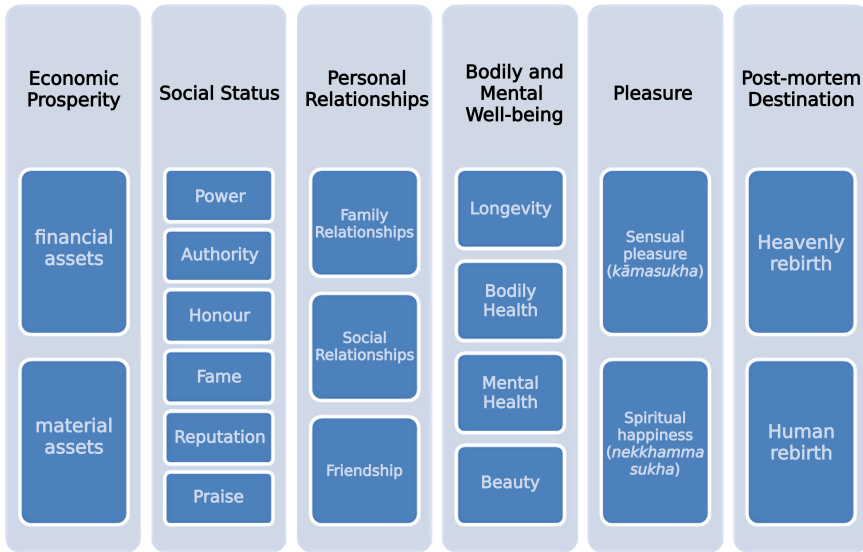
9 Classification

The items mentioned above (wealth, goods of the body, friendship, pleasure, and post-mortem destination) could be more extensively documented, but our objective has been simply to specify the main forms of prudential good and highlight some common features. The sources themselves show little interest in compiling a taxonomy of prudential good, but if we seek a general classification the prudential goods mentioned in this chapter could be grouped into six core concerns. These embrace matters touching on:

1. economic prosperity
2. social status
3. personal relationships
4. physical and mental well-being
5. pleasure
6. post-mortem destination

Alternative classifications are possible, but these six allow us to reduce a disparate range of items to a manageable framework. The six classifications along with their principal components are shown in Figure 5.1. A moment's reflection (or a glance at the 'agony' column in any popular newspaper or magazine) will reveal that many of the problems of everyday life arise in connection with three of these: items 1,3, and 4 concerning money, relationships, and health.

Figure 5.1: A sixfold classification of prudential good

What can we learn from this six-fold classification? The first thing to note is that that the list reveals a *pluralist* conception of welfare. As Vélez de Cea notes, 'Since the Pāli Nikāyas do not reduce all these different kinds of values to an overarching super-value or single good, early Buddhist ethics is pluralistic in terms of value' (Vélez de Cea 2010, 230). We see no indication of a single 'master value' to which the rest can be reduced, as classical Utilitarians thought to be the case with pleasure. Aristotle believed that goods of this kind are irreducible, observing, 'But when it comes to honour and intelligence and pleasure, their definitions are different and distinct in respect of goodness. Therefore, good is not a common characteristic corresponding to one idea' (NE 1096b24-25). Each of these goods, accordingly, has independent value.

But what *kind* of value do they have? The list we have produced is *enumerative* rather than *explanatory*. It itemises prudential goods but does

not explain why they are important. Clearly, these goods are widely valued, but we could ask for an explanation of why this is. One thing we can say is that they do not have *ultimate* value, since this is a property of virtue alone, but neither is their value purely instrumental. They may serve virtue, as when good health supports the rigours of monastic training, but health is also a basic good for human beings regardless of what other ends it serves. Accordingly, we might classify the goods listed as 'non-ultimate' but not exclusively instrumental. In the next chapter we will consider what has ultimate value for well-being.

10 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- *Sīla* is said to bring five worldly or 'prudential' benefits: wealth, reputation, confidence, an unconfused death, and rebirth in heaven.
- Prudential good is most commonly associated with the welfare of the laity.
- There are many lists of prudential goods in the Pali canon but little discussion of why these goods have value.
- The friendship of good people has a special value because the religious life is pursued in communion with others, especially in the *saṅgha*.
- There are both advantages and dangers associated with prudential goods. This is particularly true in the case of wealth and pleasure.
- We enjoy the same prudential goods in heaven as we do on earth, only in an augmented form and for a longer time.
- We can identify six main forms of prudential good: 1) economic prosperity, 2) social status, 3) personal relationships, 4) physical and mental well-being, 5) pleasure, and 6) post-mortem destination.
- Prudential goods are non-ultimate and non-instrumental.

Discussion Questions

1. Which of the six classes of prudential goods listed in this chapter are most important for a happy life? Has anything been missed out?
2. Does Buddhism teach that prudential goods are dangerous and to be avoided? If so, why does the Buddha specify the benefits of *sīla* in worldly terms?
3. According to Buddhism, is there anything wrong in wanting to be rich or experience pleasure?
4. Why is friendship so important?
5. Can a life without prudential goods truly be a happy one?

Further Reading

- *Harvey, P. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 187–203.
- Karunadasa, Y. *Early Buddhist Teachings*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 2017. Chapter 9.
- Sizemore, R.F., and D.K. Swearer. *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation*. Columbia, S. Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1990.
- Vélez de Cea, Abraham. 'Value Pluralism in Early Buddhist Ethics.' *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 33, no. 1–2 (2010): 211–37.

6 Nirvanic Well-being

1 In this Chapter

We have observed that Buddhism speaks of 'worldly' (*lokiya*) and 'otherworldly' (*lokuttara*) values. In the last chapter we considered worldly or 'prudential' well-being, and here we consider the higher form of well-being which we will call 'nirvanic' well-being. Some scholars think these two forms of well-being are mutually incompatible and distinguish between 'Kammatic' and 'Nibbānic' forms of Buddhism. 'Kammatic Buddhism' involves the practice of virtue with the goal of gaining merit (*puñña)*, whereas 'Nibbānic Buddhism' requires the transcendence of virtue and the eradication of merit. According to another view we will consider, nirvana itself is a kammatic good to be obtained through the accumulation of merit. Here we first review unsatisfactory conceptions of well-being before commending a unified conception that embraces moral virtue (*sīla),* epistemic virtue (*paññā),* and prudential good (*puñña).*

As stated previously, our discussion of nirvana is confined to 'nirvana in this life.' While an understanding of this state 'from the inside' is accessible only to those fortunate enough to attain it, the state itself is said to possess certain formal features. The first is that it is the most elevated goal a human being can attain. It is, as King puts it, 'the final destination to which all quest of ethical good finally leads' as well as 'the supreme arbiter of all moral values at every level in the Buddhist ethical structure' (King 2001, 73).

As Segall notes, 'Attaining enlightenment is Buddhism's answer to the question "What's the best possible kind of life one can aspire to?"' (Segall 2020, 33). There are lower stages of spiritual attainment (such as that of the 'stream-winner' or *sotāpanna*), but there is no state of well-being superior to nirvana. We can also say that nirvana must be completely fulfilling for human beings otherwise it could not be the end of suffering described in

the Third Noble Truth. Nirvana by itself is both necessary and sufficient for happiness. We cannot be happy without it (or some approximation to it) nor do we need nirvana *plus* something else. It is said of those who achieve nirvana they have 'done what needed to be done' (*kataṃ karaṇīyaṃ*) (DN i.83:108) suggesting that in attaining nirvana the mission has been accomplished and nothing left unfinished.

> It appears to some that Buddhism offers its followers a stark choice between two paths, a worldly (*lokiya*) one that includes *only* prudential goods, and an other-worldly (*lokuttara*) one that excludes them.

As we saw in the last chapter, Buddhist sources mention numerous prudential goods like health and friendship, and most people would agree these things make our lives better. It seems obvious that health is better than sickness, and having friends is better than being alone. When we discussed the Eightfold Path, however, we did not find any reference to prudential goods. The path appeared to lead arrow-like to nirvana by-passing worldly well-being. Can happiness be found, then, simply by following the Eightfold Path?

Our preferred model of nirvanic well-being was illustrated in Figure 1 in the Introduction where we depicted nirvana as a circle containing three elements, namely *sīla*, *paññā*, and *puñña*. In this chapter we will review conceptions of nirvanic well-being that omit one or more of these elements. We conclude by considering a conception that unites them. As we proceed it may be helpful to refer to the accompany graphic (Figure 6.1) which shows the relationship between the terms and concepts discussed.

Figure 6.1: The Buddhist conception of well-being (expanded)
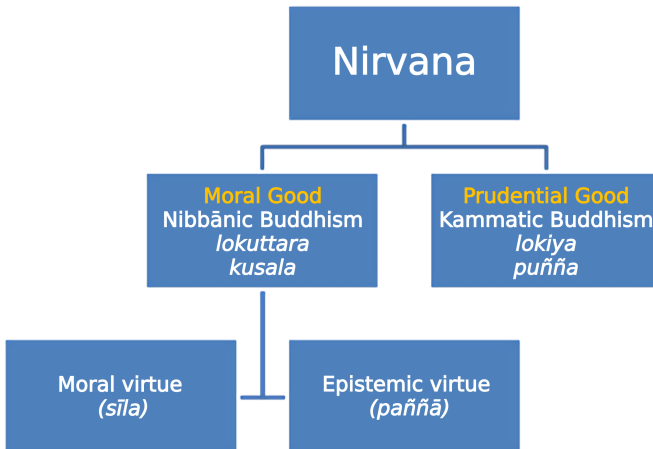
2 Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism

To some it appears that Buddhism offers its followers a stark choice between two pathways, a worldly (*lokiya*) one that includes only prudential goods, and an otherworldly (*lokuttara*) one that excludes them. As King describes it:

> But in the very heart of this structure, as we have seen, lies a basic tension – that between Nibbāna and kamma-rebirth. This tension affects all ethical relations, values, and judgments. Kammic morality is by nature relativistic and hedonistic; nibbānic morality is by nature absolute and beyond all sensual delights or preferences. (King 2001, 99)

Melford Spiro, an anthropologist who studied Buddhism in Burma, labelled these two pathways 'Kammatic Buddhism' and 'Nibbānic Buddhism' (Spiro 1982). The differences between the two forms of Buddhist practice are shown in Table 6.1. As we see, Kammatic Buddhism consists of the practice of moral virtue leading to the production of merit (*puñña*) and a fortunate rebirth. Nibbānic Buddhism, by contrast, focuses on the cultivation of wisdom (*paññā*) and leads to nirvana and the end of rebirth.

Table 6.1: Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism distinguished

Form of Buddhism:	Kammatic	Nibbānic
Goal	Good rebirth	Nibbāna
Pursued by	Laity	Monks
Means	Puñña	Kusala
Technique	Morality	Wisdom
Mode	Lokiya	Lokuttara
Attained by	Non-*arahants*	*Arahants*

In accordance with the Kammatic-Nibbānic polarity, moral virtues like *dāna* and *sīla* are confined to Kammatic Buddhism and excluded from Nibbānic Buddhism. They are excluded for the obvious reason that they produce *puñña* and so lead to rebirth. We saw in the previous chapter that the Buddha listed a good rebirth as the last of five benefits of *sīla*. There thus seems to be a gulf between moral virtue and nirvana such that the more one advances in moral virtue the farther from nirvana one finds oneself. To attain nirvana, therefore, one must abandon moral virtue (*sīla*) and cultivate only epistemic virtue (*paññā*). King suggested that Kammatic Buddhism

serves as a preparatory stage in spiritual practice but later the practitioner must reject this and turn to the exclusive practice of Nibbānic Buddhism. He expressed this as follows:

> Indeed kamma and all that it represents are a bondage and a danger to the life of the saint in the final analysis. He must kick away from under him the laboriously built ladder of kammic merit by which he has risen towards sainthood, and take to the transcendental flight on the wings of super-normal (super kammic) wisdom. (King 2001, 67)

This view is not uncommon, but it is paradoxical. It proposes that good deeds must be performed by the one who seeks sainthood, but that these same good deeds are an obstacle to the sainthood sought. It is as if one who climbs the 'ladder of kammic merit' moves closer to nirvana yet further away at the same time.

King sees this bifurcation as having arisen in chronological order: first came the quest for nirvana by the renunciate, and to this a lay ethics was later tagged on. He speaks of 'an original sharp division between the authentic Buddhist way of the monk (Nibbāna-seeking) and the way of the layman (better-rebirth-seeking) that was added thereunto' (King 2001, 155). He believes that in the course of time a synthesis occurred such that Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism merged. He speaks of a 'cross-fertilization of kammic and nibbānic ethical values … in a working harmony of values … which makes possible the travelling of two roads at once: the route to the higher heavens and the path to Nibbāna' (King 2001, 158). It is not easy to see, however, how one can travel two roads if they lead in opposite directions.

> The theory of Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism holds that while a layman seeks to generate merit (*puñña*) through generosity (*dāna*) and morality (*sīla*) in the hope of a good rebirth, a monk seeks to eradicate all karma through mental culture (*bhāvanā*) in the hope of gaining nirvana.

The theory of Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism also holds that the goals of *kamma* and nirvana are pursued by two distinct sociological groups, namely laity and monks. Thus, while a layman seeks to generate merit (*puñña*), a monk seeks to eradicate karma through mental culture (*bhāvanā*) in the hope of putting an end to rebirth. The evidence from other Theravāda

Buddhist societies, however, does not support Spiro's theory of the divergent aims of monastics and laity. According to Gombrich, the religious aspirations of both groups in Sri Lanka coincide rather than diverge. Perhaps surprisingly, both laity and monks pursue merit rather than nirvana. Gombrich writes: 'Most people, monks included, devote themselves exclusively to acts of merit (*piṅkam*), the aim of which is a good rebirth in heaven or on earth' (Gombrich 1971, 322).

What are we to make of this theory? Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism offer contrasting and mutually incompatible conceptions of well-being. Kammatic Buddhism identifies well-being with prudential good, while Nibbānic Buddhism identifies it with wisdom. Using Buddhist terminology, we can say that Kammatic Buddhism specifies *puñña* without *paññā*, while Nibbānic Buddhism specifies *paññā* without *puñña*. Kammatic Buddhism sees moral virtue as a means to gain merit (*puñña*) in order to enjoy worldly happiness of the kind described in the last chapter. Nibbānic Buddhism sees epistemic virtue (*paññā*) as a means to eradicate *puñña* in order to escape rebirth.

Both these conceptions are deficient in our view, because they exclude one or more of the three components of well-being (*sīla, paññā,* and *puñña*). The theory of Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism, therefore, does not represent the Buddhist conception of well-being correctly. Let us examine the individual components of the theory and see if we can rearrange them in a more acceptable form.

3 Nibbānic Buddhism

Nibbānic Buddhism holds a monistic view of nirvanic well-being as a cognitive state. This view enjoys considerable support. Edward Conze provides an example of those who privilege wisdom in this way when he says that 'Wisdom alone can set us free' (Conze 1983, 55). A similar view is provided by Saddhatissa who writes:

> Enlightenment consists essentially in knowing things in accordance with reality (*yathābhūtam*). In seeing thus there are no misconceptions or mental projections regarding the appearance of a thing or a course of events; the seeing is entirely clear and according to absolute reality. (Saddhatissa 1987, 25)

Saddhatissa adds that 'Nirvāṇa is considered as an example of extinction through intellectual power' (Saddhatissa 1987, 152).

> According to some authorities, nirvanic well-being is cashed out in purely epistemic terms and identified with a certain kind of knowledge, understanding, or insight.

According to these authors, nirvanic well-being is cashed out in epistemic terms as knowledge or insight. The view that wisdom is the exclusive ingredient in well-being is not unique to Buddhism. It will be recalled that in Chapter 1 we posed the question whether all the virtues are forms of knowledge. The Stoics answered this question in the affirmative, as Brennan notes:

> The Stoic Sage is best thought of as an idealized epistemic agent in the first instance; their ethical perfections all stem from their epistemic perfection. This is a Stoic specification of the traditional Socratic idea that virtue is knowledge, and vice a matter of defective belief. (Brennan 2015, 35)

On this view, the sage is above all someone who *sees*, and it is believed that because he sees correctly, he will act correctly. All that is needed for sagehood is therefore epistemic perfection. This was also a view shared by the Upaniṣads, which taught that self-realisation came about through knowledge of the soul's identity with Brahman. Aristotle, by contrast, believed that a purely intellectualist conception of human good was too narrow. While agreeing that epistemic virtue was the *highest* form of virtue, he also believed that *moral* virtue was an integral component in well-being. In taking this view, he recognised the importance of the emotions and believed that the whole person must be oriented towards the good, not just the intellect. It is not enough to *know* the good, one must also *love* and *desire* it. Nibbānic Buddhism, by contrast, takes a dim view of the emotions. As King describes it:

> Emotion clothes the entities distinguished by the intellect … with its garments of beauty or ugliness, pleasantness or unpleasantness, ethical goodness or badness. Resultantly, the total human being moves towards some items with desire, and away from others with repulsion, or is sometimes pulled in two ways at once. Thus every object of man's sense experience and intellectual creation is caught in the web of positively or negatively desirous attachment. (King 2001, 92)

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The practitioner of Nibbānic Buddhism, as King explains it, aims not to orientate the emotions towards the good (nirvana) but to purge the sentiments and so free himself from 'the web of positively or negatively desirous attachment'. The resulting emotionless state is seen as a necessary precondition for the epistemological contemplation of truth. Clearly, if seeing correctly is enough, there is no need for either moral virtue or prudential good.

4 A Moralised View of Nirvana

Nibbānic Buddhism seems overly narrow in identifying well-being exclusively with *paññā*. We saw in Chapter 2 that Buddhism defines nirvana not solely as the end of delusion, but also as the end of greed and hatred. There is no suggestion in the sources that the three roots of evil can be reduced to one. Greed and hatred supply the emotional push and pull we experience with respect to objects of perception. It is hard to conceive of a perfected being as one who has the deep understanding signified by *paññā* yet can still be moved by negative emotions. Equally, it is hard to conceive of an awakened person as one who has purged all emotion and is devoid of feeling. How could such a person feel compassion? It seems, then, that if nirvana is the highest form of well-being it must include a role for the emotions.

In support of this we noted in Chapter 1 that eliminating ignorance, or having right knowledge, does not guarantee right conduct. The person addicted to tobacco may *know* very well that smoking is harmful to her health, but she continues to smoke, nevertheless. The problem is one of emotional addiction rather than defective belief. If this is correct, nirvana cannot be defined solely in epistemic terms and must include moral virtue. Moral virtue results from a correct training of the emotions to the point where they instinctively desire the good and shun evil.

While Buddhist sources sometimes praise epistemic and moral virtue independently, the most common view is that they form an inseparable pair. The image used in Mahāyāna literature is of a bird that needs both wings to fly. The role of epistemic virtue (*paññā*) is to apprehend the truth about the way things are, such as that all phenomena (*dhamma*) are impermanent (*anicca*), without self (*anatta*), and sorrowful (*dukkha*). The role of the moral virtues is to govern the emotions and shape interactions with others in a positive way. The moral virtues are practical and allow us to *live* the virtuous or 'noble' life specified in Buddhist teachings.

> The role of wisdom or epistemic virtue (*paññā*) is to apprehend the truth about the way things are. The role of moral virtue is practical in nature: it helps us govern our emotions and to live the virtuous or 'noble' life specified in Buddhist teachings.

The conception of nirvana we have just described is *moralised* because it understands nirvana exclusively as virtue (*kusala*) attained through the destruction of the three *akusala-mūla*. By eliminating delusion, the adept acquires the epistemic virtue of wisdom, and by eliminating greed and hatred she perfects the moral virtues. We have now expanded our understanding of nirvanic well-being to include both *sīla* and *paññā*. However, we still need to define a role for *puñña*.

5 Kammatic Buddhism

In contrast to the attempt by Nibbānic Buddhism to exclude *puñña* from well-being, we see evidence of a countervailing tendency to elevate its status and importance. Indeed, we sometimes find depictions of nirvana itself as a form of prudential good attainable through the accumulation of *puñña*. This conception of nirvana has been described by Steven Collins in a book titled *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*. Collins finds in Pali literary sources a conception of the universe as containing many 'felicities' or prudential goods, one of which is nirvana. The image that comes to mind is of stars in the night sky: just as the North Star shines more brightly than the rest, so nirvana outshines other felicities. Rather than the embodiment of virtue, nirvana is conceived of as chief among worldly goods of the kind we reviewed in the last chapter.

> In some sources, nirvana is portrayed as a 'super-felicity' characterised by comfort, security, and freedom, in other words, as a form of exalted worldly happiness.

On this view, nirvana is quintessentially the end of suffering, or conversely, a state of felicity and comfort. This view finds support in the imagery used to describe nirvana in the Pali canon. The commonly encountered epithets for nirvana have been conveniently summarised in the *PTS Dictionary* (*s.v.*nibbāna) where we read that nirvana is:

> [T]he harbour of refuge, the cool cave, the island amidst the
> floods, the place of bliss, emancipation, liberation, safety, the
> supreme, the transcendental, the uncreated, the tranquil, the
> home of ease, the calm, the end of suffering, the medicine
> for all evil, the unshaken, the ambrosia, the immaterial, the
> imperishable, the abiding, the further shore, the unending, the
> bliss of effort, the supreme joy, the ineffable, the detachment,
> the holy city.

The above imagery is consistent with the idea of nirvana as a 'super-felicity' characterised by comfort, security, and freedom, in other words, as a form of exalted worldly happiness. Examples of texts cited by Collins that depict nirvana in this way include the Treasure-Store Discourse (Nidhikaṇḍa Sutta, Kh 7) and Milinda's Questions. Collins notes:

> In both, nirvana occurs as the culmination . . . of a list of good
> things. In the former, laying up a store (of merit, according to
> the commentary . . .) by means of almsgiving, etc. is said to lead
> to every human excellence – inter alia beauty of appearance
> and voice, local kingship or Wheel-turning Kingship . . . as well
> as to the pleasure of the divine worlds and the attainment of
> nirvana (*nibbāna-sampatti*, v.13).

Collins links this to a development whereby nirvana came to be seen as the product of accumulated merit (*puñña*). He writes:

> [N]irvana comes to be seen as the apex of what can be acquired
> by merit rather than a goal qualitatively different from it, as
> the pinnacle of what can be attained by good *karma* rather
> than something beyond *karma*. It is not that the distinction be-
> tween *kusala* and *puñña* is consciously abandoned: it is simply
> disregarded' (Collins 1998, 289).

Collins observes that while the distinction between *kusala* and *puñña* exists 'in texts of systematic thought', it 'tends to diminish to vanishing point in others, particularly narratives' (Collins 1998, 289). Nor, would it appear, is the distinction much respected in contemporary Buddhist societies. As Collins notes, 'it is clear that in practice such fine distinctions as that between merit and what is skillful are often ignored, as modern ethnography abundantly attests' (Collins 1998, 290). This is confirmed by Spiro's observation that Burmese Buddhists believe that nirvana can be attained by merit.

Unlike nibbānic Buddhism, in which admission to nirvana requires the extinction of merit as well as demerit, Burmese Buddhism insists that nirvana, like *samsara,* is attained by the accumulation of merit. (Spiro 1982, 84)

On this conception of well-being, there is no need to 'kick away the ladder of merit' to reach nirvana. On the contrary, the ladder of merit reaches all the way to nirvana.

James McDermott characterizes the sentiment expressed in the Treasure-Store Discourse as 'representative of an essentially lay tradition which worked to harmonize the ultimate and proximate goals' (McDermott 1973, 344). The result of this harmonization was the assimilation of *puñña* to nirvana in the manner described. In this respect, nirvana is sometimes compared to a city, and is depicted in illustrations as a place of comfort and security. As we read in one medieval manuscript:

The great city of Nibbāna has an encircling wall, a gate, a watchtower, a moat, streets, a bazaar, a pillar, an interior (place), a bed, a couch, the brightness of lamps, a lake filled with cool water and sand: it is frequented by bees and by flocks of geese, cakkavāla birds, pheasants, cuckoos, peacocks and heron. (Hallisey 1993, 128f)

What we see in the 'lay' tradition is resistance to the moralised conception of nirvana and a desire to expand the Buddhist conception of well-being to include prudential good.

Lay Practice Reconsidered

According to Spiro and King, lay Buddhists perform good deeds solely to accumulate merit, but perhaps this oversimplifies the reality of lay practice. In Chapter 2 we mentioned that some Buddhists conceive of merit in a financial way and keep a daily total of their 'balance'. We noted, however, that the associated motivation was selfish and not in accordance with the spirit of Buddhist teachings. By contrast, many Buddhist laity perform good deeds for nobler reasons. For example, they make donations because they are generous and unselfish individuals. They are motivated, in other words, by moral virtue. Rather than the avaristic pursuit of merit, the 'kammatic' conduct of the laity can also be seen as imbued with the values of the Eightfold Path.

Wisdom (*paññā*) is implicit in moral virtue (*sīla*) because the exercise of moral virtue presupposes understanding. This was affirmed by the Buddha in the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta when he stated, 'the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality'. A virtuous act is a wise act, so when Buddhist laity act virtuously they also act wisely, and this is all that is required by the Eightfold Path. As discussed in Chapter 2, in the first stage (Right View) only a preliminary understanding of doctrine is required together with faith in the Buddha's teachings. It is wrong, therefore, to depict the lay person who accumulates merit through moral virtue as trapped on the *lokiya* path and subject to an endless cycle of rebirth, as Kammatic Buddhism would suggest. The spiritual trajectory of such practitioners is more like an ascending spiral than a circle.

An alternative interpretation of Kammatic Buddhism, then, is that in living a moral life, lay persons are following the Eightfold Path correctly, if at a preliminary stage. They cultivate moral virtue (*sīla*) and wisdom (*paññā*) simultaneously and receive the karmic reward (*puñña*) that is their due. King refers to this alternative interpretation of 'merit' as 'moral worthiness'. 'In this context', he writes, 'to gain merit means to become increasingly more worthy, to gain more and more spiritual capacity which will enable one to achieve sainthood in the end' (King 2001, 49).

6 A Unified Concept of Nirvanic Well-being

In the revised understanding of Kammatic Buddhism just described we see the outlines of a unified conception of nirvanic well-being that accommodates the three components of *sīla*, *paññā*, and *puñña* in a satisfactory manner. In the remainder of the chapter we hope to consolidate this unified conception and demonstrate – taking the Buddha as our example – how *puñña* is a necessary complement to virtue. To do so, we return to a text that sheds important light on the composition of nirvanic well-being, namely the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta (DN 4).

The Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta

The *sutta* takes its name from Soṇadaṇḍa, a Brahmin who enjoys considerable prestige and is preoccupied with social status. Soṇadaṇḍa is described as enjoying a good reputation, being 'well-born on both the mother's and father's side,' and possessing 'great wealth and resources.' He is said to be 'handsome, good-looking, pleasing, of the most beautiful complexion, in

form and countenance like Brahmā.' He is virtuous, well-spoken, and polite, the 'teacher's teacher of many.' He is also held in high esteem by both secular and religious authorities, being 'esteemed, made much of, honoured, revered, worshipped' by king Bimbisāra and the Brahmin Pokkharasāti. Finally, he resides at Campā, 'a populous place, full of grass, timber, water and corn, which has been given to him by King Seniya Bimbisāra of Magadha as a royal gift, and with royal powers.' Soṇadaṇḍa, in other words, is the epitome of worldly success in the terms a status-conscious Brahmin might conceive of it, and possesses many prudential goods identified in the previous chapter.

Soṇadaṇḍa contemplates visiting the Buddha, but Brahmin colleagues express concern that this would be 'unfitting' and result in a loss of prestige, in part because of the Buddha's youth at the time. Soṇadaṇḍa responds by pointing out that the Buddha is in every respect his equal, being 'well-born on both sides,' and 'a wanderer from a wealthy family, of great wealth and possessions.' The Buddha's fame is so great, he tells us, that 'people come to consult him from foreign kingdoms and foreign lands.' He adds that 'a good report has been spread about him' to the effect that the Buddha is courteous and urbane, 'revered, honoured, esteemed and worshipped' by humans and gods, and that unlike the reputation of other ascetics and Brahmins 'Gotama's fame is based on his achievement of unsurpassed wisdom and conduct.' Finally, we hear that the Buddha is also revered by king Bimbisāra and the Brahmin Pokkharasāti. Soṇadaṇḍa concludes his eulogy by stating 'However much I might praise the ascetic Gotama, that praise is insufficient, he is beyond all praise' (DN i.117:128). We see that Soṇadaṇḍa evaluates the Buddha's happiness primarily in terms of prudential good in the same way he conceives of his own.

The True Brahmin

Having reassured himself that he would not lose face through the encounter, Soṇadaṇḍa visits the Buddha. The discussion opens by the Buddha asking what qualities are essential in a Brahmin, and Soṇadaṇḍa replies that there are five: a Brahmin is 1) well born, 2) versed in the Vedic mantras, 3) handsome, 4) virtuous, and 5) wise. The Buddha enquires which of these five can be left out, and one by one, appearance, the mantras, and a good birth are eliminated leaving only virtue and wisdom. As we saw in Chapter 4, the conversation then continues with the Buddha posing a further question to Soṇadaṇḍa as follows:

> But, Brahmin, if one were to omit one of these two points, could one truthfully declare: 'I am a Brahmin'? 'No, Gotama. For wisdom is purified by morality, and morality is purified by wisdom: where one is, the other is, the moral man has wisdom and the wise man has morality, and the combination of morality and wisdom is called the highest thing in the world. Just as one hand washes the other, or one foot the other, so wisdom is purified by morality and this combination is called the highest thing in the world.' (DN i.124:131)

The Buddha confirms Soṇadaṇḍa's opinion, providing a definitive statement on Buddhist axiology. Here, the supreme good – 'the highest thing in the world' – is defined as a combination of moral and epistemic virtue. These two values are the irreducible core of Buddhist happiness: neither can be eliminated, and a person who lacks either cannot be considered a 'true Brahmin.' We note also that neither is superior: they are likened to two hands or two feet – different, but equal and interdependent. These values are mutually supporting and mutually perfective in the way they purify one another.

> In the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta, the supreme good is defined as a combination of moral and epistemic virtue. These two values are the irreducible core of Buddhist happiness: neither can be eliminated, and a person who lacks either cannot be considered a 'true Brahmin'.

Contrasting Values

The Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta at first sight appears to endorse a moralised Stoic-like conception of happiness because it does not include prudential good in its definition of 'the highest thing in the world'. The discourse, however, may also be read in another way. While we can certainly agree with the statement that virtue is the *highest* thing in the world this does not mean it is the *only* thing in the world that has value. The possibility remains that there are other things in the world that have value and contribute to the well-being of the virtuous. Is prudential good one of them?

The *sutta* presents two contrasting conceptions of value. First, we hear from Soṇadaṇḍa, who identifies happiness with prudential good in the form of wealth, beauty, reputation, and social status. Then, through his skilful use of Socratic-style questioning, the Buddha demonstrates to Soṇadaṇḍa that

this view is incorrect and that it would be a mistake to identify happiness with prudential good. The reason it would be a mistake is that it overlooks the importance of virtue. Without virtue, no amount of prudential good can help an agent achieve happiness.

It does not follow, however, that Soṇadaṇḍa is mistaken in attributing value to prudential good. His error, rather, is in *excluding virtue* from his conception of well-being. I think we can see that prudential good also has value because when Soṇadaṇḍa praises the Buddha he does so in terms of his own understanding of happiness, and the Buddha does not repudiate this appraisal or qualify it in any way. Soṇadaṇḍa's eulogy mentions the Buddha's noble birth, his family wealth, his beauty, and his honour, fame, reputation, and praise. The Buddha does not object to his good fortune being characterized in these terms or denigrate these values as ignoble or unimportant to one like himself.

To the prudential goods just mentioned we can add others. For the sake of completeness, we list again the inventory of fourteen forms of prudential good identified in the previous chapter:

- a good rebirth
- wealth (including financial and material assets)
- pleasure
- friendship
- good family and social relations
- longevity
- health
- beauty
- power
- authority
- honour
- fame
- reputation
- praise

It will be seen that only the first two do not apply to the Buddha. A good rebirth is inapplicable for the obvious reason that a Buddha will not be reborn, and the second – wealth – is voluntarily set aside as incompatible with the mendicant lifestyle. It is hard not to see the other prudential goods as augmenting the Buddha's status, prestige, and charisma. If they did not, we might expect the sources to dismiss them as irrelevant to happiness after the fashion of the Stoics. Indeed, the prudential goods mentioned are so

central to the Buddha's well-being that it would be hard to imagine him bereft of them.

In one respect it would be impossible, since a Buddha necessarily possesses the goods of the body characteristic of a Great Man (*mahāpurisa*). Recent scholarship has demonstrated the extensive association between the body and virtue in Indian Buddhism (Mrozik 2007). As John Powers notes, 'The Buddha has the most beautiful possible body because he surpasses all others in morality, wisdom, and other good qualities' (Powers 2009, 80). It was by virtue of his perfect body that the Buddha enjoyed the goods of *beauty*, *longevity,* and *good health*. As Powers notes, 'The most modest descriptions of the Buddha credit him with superhuman strength and wisdom; physical skills surpassing those of all other people; a perfect physique; and the ability to perform a range of magical feats' (Powers 2012, 25).

> While virtue forms the core of the Buddha's happiness, prudential good is also a constituent part. This means that *puñña* is integral to nirvana.

The Lakkhaṇa Sutta (DN 30) associates each of the Buddha's thirty-two bodily marks with a prudential benefit resulting from the virtuous deeds that he performed in previous lives. The *sutta* tells us that as a result of these deeds the Buddha cannot be impeded by any enemy, that he has a large retinue, is long-lived, receives fine food and drink, becomes supreme among all beings, receives fine goods, quickly acquires whatever he needs, is popular with all, receives loyalty from all, is obeyed by monks, his followers are not divided, he has a persuasive voice, he cannot be overcome by any foe, and his followers are pure. As Anālayo comments, 'In their karmic setting, the marks function in a way comparable to a convex lens, becoming an embodiment of accumulated merits from the past and at the same time serving as a visual summary of what makes a Buddha' (Anālayo 2017, 138).

The Buddha is thus 'well off' in almost every dimension of prudential good apart from the two exceptions noted (wealth and a good rebirth). So much so that Walters writes 'one cannot help thinking that Gotama led a charmed life' (Walters 1990, 70). As King points out, the same may be said of the Buddha in his previous existences as a *bodhisattva*: 'In a word, virtue and its rightful rewards – power, superior talents, good fortune, success – are joined together in this figure in *every one* of his existences' (King 2001, 53 original italics). The Buddha possessed bodily and other goods as a consequence of his virtue and as such they are inseparable from his nirvana. We can put this another way and say that it would be impossible for

the Buddha to be perfect in virtue without at the same time possessing the goods of the body mentioned, along with many other blessings and boons of the kind that fall under the umbrella of *puñña*.

We may wonder whether the *puñña* the Buddha enjoys in his last life is simply *puñña* inherited from the past, or whether he produces new *puñña* through virtuous actions performed *after* his awakening. While an interesting question, and one we will return to in the next chapter, it does not have a direct bearing on our present topic because the issue is not where the Buddha's *puñña* comes from, but whether it enhances his well-being.

In sum, while the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta at first seems to support a moralised view of nirvana, the variety of prudential goods intrinsic to the Buddha's happiness gives grounds for thinking that the scope of nirvana extends beyond moral and epistemic virtue. It thus seems reasonable to conclude that the supreme happiness enjoyed by the virtuous is a synthesis of virtue and prudential good.

7 Summary

In this chapter we reviewed conceptions of nirvanic well-being involving different permutations of moral virtue (*sīla*), epistemic virtue (*paññā*), and prudential good (*puñña*). Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism specify two distinct forms of Buddhist practice and separate worldly well-being from nirvanic happiness. We also encountered the view of the 'lay' tradition that nirvana is itself a form of elevated worldly happiness. We may speculate that the lay tradition represents a reaction to renouncers who emphasised asceticism and mystical knowledge. The existence of these different conceptions is evidence of a tension in the tradition over the nature of nirvanic well-being.

Our preferred conception includes a role for *puñña*. At first sight it seems difficult to include prudential good because many sources appear to disparage it as a 'worldly' value. But we should not discount its role so quickly. The Buddha is described as having practised austerities for six years prior to his awakening. These austerities involved the deliberate rejection of prudential good and the voluntary choice of hardship with respect to lifestyle. However, the Buddha eventually rejected the life of harsh austerity (*atta-kilamatha*) in favour of the 'middle way' (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), a decision that signalled his recognition of the importance of prudential good to happiness.

> There is only one Path and one continuum of Buddhist practice. All practitioners, up to and including the *arahant*, produce volitions that are *kusala* and experience the resultant karmic benefits known as *puñña*.

As noted in the Introduction, the failure to recognise that merit and virtue are an inseparable pair has caused problems in understanding Buddhist ethics. It has been suggested in this chapter that the moralised understanding of nirvana needs to be expanded to make space for *puñña*. Thus, while virtue (*kusala*) plays a primary role, *puñña* is also required for well-being in the fullest sense of the term. The suggestion that *puñña* is integral to nirvana is contrary to the position of orthodox sources. It also seems to contradict canonical statements to the effect that the *arahant* passes 'beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*.' These are problems we will address in the next two chapters.

8 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Some scholars believe there are two distinct forms of Buddhist practice which they refer to as 'Kammatic' and 'Nibbānic Buddhism.'
- 'Kammatic Buddhism' consists of the performance of good deeds leading to the production of merit (*puñña*) and a fortunate rebirth.
- 'Nibbānic Buddhism' focuses on the cultivation of wisdom and seeks the end of rebirth.
- There is a 'lay' tradition that understands nirvana in terms of prudential good accessible through *puñña*.
- The orthodox tradition holds a 'moralised' view of nirvanic well-being as consisting solely of virtue in its moral and epistemic forms (*sīla* and *paññā*) and excluding prudential good (*puñña*). It believes the actions of the awakened do not produce *puñña*.
- A unified view of well-being would conceive of nirvana as incorporating moral virtue (*sīla*), epistemic virtue (*paññā*) and prudential good (*puñña*).

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the difference between 'Kammatic' and 'Nibbānic' Buddhism.
2. What view of nirvana is held by the 'lay' tradition?
3. Explain the role of *sīla* in nirvanic well-being.
4. Can nirvanic well-being be identified exclusively with epistemic virtue (*paññā*)?
5. Does prudential good play any role in nirvanic well-being? If so, what is it?
6. Do awakened beings like the Buddha continue to produce *puñña*?
7. What three values would be included in a unified view of Buddhist well-being?

Further Reading

- Gowans C.W. *Buddhist moral philosophy: an introduction*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis; 2015. Introduction. Chapters 3, 5:109–114.
- Karunadasa, Y. *Early Buddhist Teachings*. Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 2017. Chapter 10.
- *King, Winston L. *In the Hope of Nibbana: The Ethics of Theravada Buddhism*. Seattle: Pariyatti Press, 2001, 27–32; 153–161.
- Saddhatissa, H. *Buddhist Ethics: Essence of Buddhism*. New York, N.Y.: Wisdom Publications, 1987. Chapter 8.

7 *Kusala* and *Puñña*

1 In this Chapter

Kusala and *puñña* are important ethical terms and their meaning has been discussed at length by scholars. How we define these terms will influence our understanding of Buddhist ethics, so it is important to be clear about their meaning. We discuss the meaning of each in turn beginning with *kusala*. It will be suggested that problems of interpretation have arisen due to a failure to distinguish clearly between two distinct forms of the good: *kusala* as moral good and *puñña* as prudential good. If we keep this distinction firmly in mind, problems that have seemed perplexing begin to look less daunting. To regard the terms as synonymous, on the other hand, leads to confusion. Here we identify three ways the relationship between *kusala* and *puñña* may be understood, only one of which is valid. Our first question is whether 'skilful' is an appropriate translation of *kusala*, and we suggest it may not be.

In the last chapter we spoke of three nirvanic values (*sīla*, *paññā*, and *puñña*), but since *sīla* and *paññā* are both virtues, we can also make a twofold distinction into virtue (*kusala*) and prudential good (*puñña*). Despite his support for the theory of Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism, King recognises that to be comprehensive well-being must include both. 'The blending of goods with goodness,' he writes, 'inclusive of both material and mental-moral factors, is inevitable.' He expands as follows:

> But we must go further to reiterate the important point that not only are material benefits the sign and result of virtue, they are *inseparable from* virtue in the complete good. Purity of character without pleasantness of condition is not completely good in the Buddhist sense; nor of course is pleasantness of

condition without purity, completely good either.' (King 2001, 51 original italics)

Drawing a parallel with Christianity, he adds:

So also it must be said that Buddhism is only doing on the instalment plan what the Christian does all at once with the concept of Heaven: joining virtue and happiness together in perfect union. For is not the Christian Heaven, whatever variations of portrayal there may be, essentially the adding of just deserts to virtue, *both* to be enjoyed at the same time? (King 2001, 52 original italics)

In a mathematical turn of phrase King sums up by saying 'the successive multiplication of ordinary virtues, plus the compound interest of the kammic process, has produced the absolute good' (King 2001, 56). In Tibetan sources this contrast is framed as a distinction between 'High Status' (prudential good) and 'Definite Goodness' (virtue). With reference to this distinction Charles Goodman comments 'To unify these seemingly disparate considerations is, perhaps, the most important task for modern interpreters of Buddhist ethics' (Goodman 2009, 97). The purpose of the present chapter is to advance this task.

There are three ways to understand the relationship between *kusala* and *puñña*. The first is to see them as antithetical. Thus, the nirvana-seeker should pursue *kusala* and avoid *puñña*. This is the rationale underlying the Kammatic-Nibbānic model of Buddhist practice. The second is that *kusala* and *puñña* are synonymous and both denote virtue. This fails to appreciate the difference between the moral and prudential dimensions of the good. The third is that the terms are related in what we might describe as a 'causal partnership'. They are *causally* related in that *kusala* is the cause of *puñña*, and they are *partners* in denoting ontologically separate but related dimensions of well-being. It will be suggested below that the last is the correct understanding of the relationship.

2 *Kusala*

Our first task is to clarify the meaning of *kusala*. There has been considerable discussion of how the term should be translated. In an earlier work (Keown 2001, 119f) I compared the semantic scope of *kusala* to the English word 'good'. I suggested that both express approval in a range of contexts. Thus,

Table 7.1: Three ways of understanding the relationship between *kusala* and
  puñña

The relationship between *kusala* and *puñña*	
1 *Kusala* v *puñña*	Antithetical
2 *Kusala* = *puñña*	Synonymous
3 *Kusala* + *puñña*	Causal partnership

for example, we can talk about a 'good digestion', a 'good deed,' or a 'good
craftsman.' In each case, the adjective 'good' signifies the presence of some
commendable property. There is something about the digestion, the deed,
and the craftsman that we think excellent or praiseworthy. It does not follow,
however, that we think all are good in the same way. Digestion, for example,
is good in a prudential sense because it is an aspect of bodily well-being. An
act of generosity, on the other hand, is morally good.

What about the craftsman? When we praise the craftsman, we are praising
his skill or technical ability as demonstrated in the quality of his workman-
ship. In this sense the Buddha reports that in a previous life he was once a
chariot maker 'skilled in crookedness, faults, and defects in wood' (*kusalo
dāruvaṅkānaṃ dārudosānaṃ dārukasāvānaṃ*) (AN i.112:211). The Buddha
in this case was both skilled and virtuous, but these are separate attributes.
Another craftsman could be skilled but not virtuous.

The skill of the craftsman involves a mastery of some art for the purpose of
producing results. Thus, a chariot maker makes chariots, and a potter makes
pots. Skills of this kind are directed to the production of something whereas
virtue is directed to the perfection of oneself. Skill directs productive activity
towards an end that lies beyond it, an end completed in the product made.
The end of virtue, by contrast, is the perfection of human life.[1] As Aristotle
says, 'good action is itself the end' (NE 1140b6-7).

What was said above about 'good' also applies to *kusala*. *Kusala* demon-
strates a favourable attitude towards some object and can signify approval
in a variety of contexts. It follows that when we translate *kusala* it will be
important to choose a term appropriate to the context. For example, if a text
enquires if someone is feeling '*kusala*' today (*kacci nu bhoto kusala'nti*)
we would know the enquiry related to health and would translate *kusala* as
'well'. If it describes an act of generosity as *kusala*, we would understand
that the deed is good in a moral sense and translate *kusala* as 'virtuous'. And
if a source describes someone as good at earning money (*āya-kosalla*) we

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[1]Aristotle makes a similar distinction between art and prudence (NE VI 4-5).

would understand this as a reference to technical ability or 'skill' in business and translate accordingly.

> *Kusala* demonstrates a favourable attitude towards some object and can signify approval in a variety of contexts. When we translate *kusala* it is important to take account of the context.

The same three senses of *kusala* are identified in the commentaries.[2] We read in the *Atthasālinī*, for instance, that *kusala* can be understood in the sense of health (*ārogyaṭṭhena*), blamelessness (*anavajjaṭṭhena*), or as produced by skill (*kosallasambhūtaṭṭhena*). The Rhys Davids sum up as follows:

> Buddhaghosa distinguishes under kusala the *Jātaka* meaning of that which makes for well-being (arogya), as taught by common-sense, the *Suttanta* meaning or what is ethically right (anavajja) … and the *Abhidhamma* meaning, as that which is efficient (kosalla), makes for absence of pain (niddaratha), for happy results (sukhavipāka). (Rhys Davids 1921, 97 n.3)

Here, Buddhaghosa identifies three senses of *kusala* relating to i) health or 'well-being'; ii) 'what is ethically right'; and iii) 'that which is efficient'. In these examples we recognize the three forms of the good we described earlier, namely prudential good, moral good, and technical skill. The last use is instrumental in that it concerns the use of skill or expertise to some productive end. There is nothing unusual about Buddhaghosa's classification, and Aristotle makes the same threefold distinction into the good as pleasant, noble, and useful (NE 1104b31-2).

The three senses of *kusala* distinguished by Buddhaghosa are shown in Table 7.1. Like 'good', *kusala* can function as adjective or substantive, so we can both describe things as 'good' (adjective) and speak of individual 'goods' (substantive) like health and friendship.

Given that both 'good' and '*kusala'* have the three senses mentioned, I suggested that the translation of *kusala* as 'skilful' was appropriate only in an instrumental sense, and was inappropriate on both conceptual and stylistic grounds in a moral context (Keown 2001, 119). It is wrong on *conceptual* grounds because it confuses an instrumental usage with a moral one. A person who is morally good is not good in the sense that a craftsman is

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[2] Asl 62f; cf. PS i.204; DN-A iii.883.

Figure 7.1: Three senses of *kusala* distinguished by Buddhaghosa
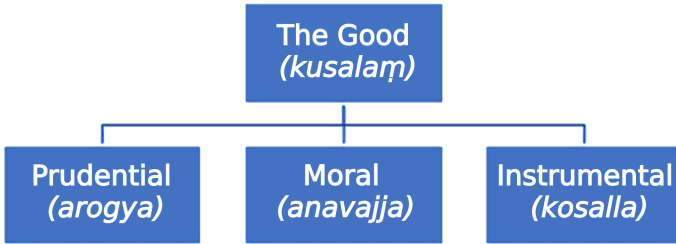
skilful. And 'skilful' is wrong on *stylistic* grounds because more appropriate vocabulary is available to express moral commendation. No boy scout would say that in helping an old lady across the street he had done his 'skilful deed for the day'.

Philology

My suggestion that 'skilful' was an inappropriate translation of *kusala* in moral contexts was questioned by Lance Cousins, who in a much-quoted philological investigation disagreed, and concluded that the generic sense of *kusala* as 'good' was a later development (Cousins 1996, 142f). The root philological meaning, he suggested, was 'intelligent' or 'wise', particularly in relation to the performance of rituals and the mastery of meditational techniques. On this basis he concluded that the earliest and most central meaning of *kusala* was skill or expertise acquired through knowledge (Cousins 1996, 156).

Responding to my criticism of the translation of *kusala* in a moral context as 'skilful' Cousins commented:

> As Keown indicates, the use of 'skilful' is stylistically slightly unnatural here in terms of English usage. Perhaps, however, this only shows that Buddhist concepts are themselves unfamiliar to ordinary English usage and we should be cautious about adopting concepts with many hidden implications, deriving from a long history of European theological and philosophical debate. (Cousins 1996, 138f.)

As Cousins rightly says, scholars should be cautious. It is not clear, however, why 'skilful' is the more cautious choice when translating *kusala*. It hardly seems more cautious to translate a term in a way that is unprecedented and, as Cousins accepts, stylistically 'unnatural'. Indeed, it might be thought reckless to depart from standard usage and the terminology adopted by previous generations of scholars. Earlier translators like the Rhys Davids and Lord Chalmers did not favour the translation 'skill'. In their translation of the *Dialogues of the Buddha* (1899-1921), for instance, the Rhys Davids consistently use standard moral vocabulary for *kusala* and *akusala*. The terms they use are good/bad, good/evil, moral/immoral, and righteous/unrighteous. There is no suggestion on the part of these translators that morality is a matter of 'skill'. Moreover, the problem is not simply a matter of 'style': the stylistic unnaturalness alerts us to a deeper conceptual mismatch.

> Early scholars consistently use standard moral vocabulary for the translation of *kusala* and do not use the term 'skilful'. It was I.B. Horner who introduced 'skilful' as a translation of *kusala*, a usage later defended by Lance Cousins.

Cousins was evidently concerned about the 'hidden implications' a term might have and seemed worried about Buddhist ethics being contaminated by inappropriate Western notions. Such concerns, however, might lead to the opposite conclusion. In order to avoid the danger of 'hidden implications' it might be thought *wiser* to employ tried and tested terminology that has been subjected to critical analysis and clarification in the course of 'a long history of theological and philosophical debate'. It is highly unlikely, for example, there are many 'hidden implications' to a term like 'virtue' given that the concept of virtue and its role in the moral life has been discussed by countless generations of scholars from the Greeks onward. By contrast, no moralist, so far as I am aware, has ever described virtue as a 'skill' in any language. Be that as it may, the substantive question is not whether a translation *may* distort the original meaning but whether *in fact* it does. My argument was that this is precisely the problem with imposing the translation 'skill' in a moral context, namely that it distorts our understanding of Buddhist ethics.

Subsequent research has cast doubt on Cousins' conclusions in respect of both philology and chronology (Schmithausen 2013, 441f). Schmithausen challenges the narrowing of the scope of *kusala* to a primarily technical meaning of 'skilful' and argues persuasively that the early semantic range of *kusala* encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings including 'good',

'right', 'wholesome', 'advantageous', 'fortunate', 'auspicious', 'alright', and 'fine' (Schmithausen 2013, 446). Thus, he understands *kusala* as conveying approval in a much wider range of contexts than the technical one of 'skilfulness' in the production of results. He also inverts the chronology proposed by Cousins and regards the technical sense of *kusala* as the later one. Following a comprehensive review of the philological evidence Schmithausen sums up as follows:

> If the preceding argumentation is correct, the original meaning of *kuśala* in the terminological sense is something like 'beneficial', 'wholesome', with, probably, an additional connotation of 'right', 'correct'. In a sense, one may even render *kuśala* in the terminological sense by 'good' in the sense of good for somebody, or for attaining a certain benefit, or in the sense of being approved by the wise. But in my opinion, it is not, originally, connected with *kuśala* 'skillful' ... The association of *kusala* in the terminological sense with the meaning 'skillful' as expressed in its commentarial explanation as *kosallasaṃbhūta* is, in my opinion, a later device, probably motivated mainly by Abhidharmic considerations (Schmithausen 2013, 459).

Schmithausen thus rejects Cousins's thesis that 'skilful' is the primary meaning of *kusala*. If this is correct there seems little justification for privileging the technical sense in contexts where *kusala* clearly denotes 'what is ethically right'. As Schmithausen observes, 'This connotation of 'right' and 'wrong' in *kusala* and *akusala* would appear particularly suitable in the case of such actions and attitudes we would call 'moral' and 'immoral', which in the canon are often called 'good behavior' (*sucarita*) and 'bad behavior' (*duccarita*), respectively' (Schmithausen 2013, 458).

The Popularity of 'Skilful'

It appears that the translation of *kusala* as 'skilful' in a moral context is not defensible on either philological or conceptual grounds. We may wonder, then, why 'skilful' became popular in preference to more conventional moral vocabulary. Cousins did not initiate this usage, and it appears to have been I.B. Horner (1896-1981) who popularized it. A glance at the indices (s.v. *skill*) of her three-volume work *The Middle Length Sayings* (Horner 1954) reveals that she favours this translation systematically. In doing so she diverges, apparently as a matter of policy, from Lord Chalmers' earlier

translation of the same text in *Further Dialogues of the Buddha*, which she no doubt had before her having inherited it along with the rest of his library in 1931.

Horner was initially admitted to Cambridge to study Moral Sciences at Newnham College (1914-17) and it may be that the curriculum disposed her to a particular theoretical perspective on ethics. Burford informs us how in a letter to her grandmother in 1922 Horner describes herself as 'a true daughter of rationalist, scientific, Cambridge, and a firm disciple of Kant' (Burford 2014, 75). Horner clearly saw herself as a child of the Enlightenment. While not a Buddhist we learn that she 'firmly rejected Christianity' (Burford 2008, 21). She also spoke approvingly of the fact that her secondary school allowed pupils the 'freedom not to go to church'. Along with her grandmother, Horner shared an interest in the views of Stanley Coit (1857-1944), an American social activist who became a British citizen and 'advocated replacing Christian churches with humanist ethical societies' (Burford 2014, 75). Horner plainly had little time for Christianity.

The reason for Horner's innovative translation of *kusala*, then, may have more to do with ideology than philology. It is not hard to imagine a desire on her part to distance Buddhism from Judaeo-Christian ethics and present it as in harmony with Enlightenment values. This would explain her decision to avoid conventional ethical terminology with its religious associations. The subtext is that Buddhist ethics, unlike Christian ethics (or a common caricature of it), is based on enlightened reason rather than the commands of an irascible deity. In part, this aversion to traditional moral terminology would have been encouraged by the anti-Christian polemic of reformers like Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933) who, according to Harvey, 'depicted the God of Judaism and Christianity as violent and capricious' (Harvey 2019, 61).

There is evidence of a determination on the part of many interpreters to distance Buddhist ethics from any association with the commands of divine lawgiver. Introductions to Buddhism, for example, are at pains to point out that the Five Precepts are 'voluntary undertakings' as opposed to the 'commandments' of Christianity, as if morality in Buddhism was a matter of choice. There is nothing voluntary, however, about the law of karma, and all are bound by its injunctions whether they follow them voluntarily or not.

> The use of a neutral, technical vocabulary like 'skilful' is intended to avoid what some scholars see as the undesirable influence of Christian theism.

In sum, the use of supposedly neutral terminology like 'skilful' may have been chosen to depict Buddhist ethics as in harmony with Enlightenment values and based on reason rather than obedience to divine decree. Whatever her motive, Horner set a hare running that succeeding generations of scholars have followed for the most part uncritically. Authors continue to affirm that 'skilful' is a more valid, appropriate, or 'authentically Buddhist' translation of *kusala*. Some even claim that 'skilful' is the 'literal' meaning of *kusala*. This is like saying that 'skilful' is the literal meaning of 'good', when the most we can say is that it is one sense of the term.

3 *Puñña*

The attempt by scholars like Horner to depict virtue as a skill has caused problems in understanding the relationship between *kusala* and *puñña*. Once we understand that *kusala* in a moral context means 'virtue', however, we begin to grasp the meaning of its counterpart term *puñña*. From classical times, Western moralists have reflected on the relationship between virtue and happiness, and when we realise that this is the relationship signified by *kusala* and *puñña* we get a better understanding of both terms.

As various commentators have pointed out, *puñña* lacks precision. Cousins notes, '*puñña* was almost certainly not a technical term in the thought of the Buddha and his early disciples' although 'it was no doubt part of the background of beliefs current at the time' (Cousins 1996, 155). James Egge has traced how *puñña* evolved from its role in Vedic sacrifice to become part of the karmic discourse of Buddhism. While traces of the older form remain, especially in relation to the practice of *dāna*, the mechanism through which prudential good was thought to be delivered changed over time. Egge speaks of 'a fundamental shift in Indic religions, from the Vedic vision of the world as constituted by sacrifice, to the classical view of the world as constituted by karma' (Egge 2015, 115). Cousins likewise identifies pre-Buddhist and Buddhist senses of the term:

> In the earliest (pre-Buddhist) literature (Ṛg-veda and Atharva-veda) it appears first with the senses of 'happiness' or 'good fortune' as a noun and 'pleasant' or 'happy' as an adjective. Initially, there seems to have been no suggestion that this was necessarily the result of anything done by the individual. Such a wider sense of the word remains current in later Sanskrit literature, although the meaning which associates the term more closely with acts and their results tends to become predominant.

Already in the pre-Buddhist period the word had developed in its usage and become part of the brahminical cultus, both sacrificial and more general. So what was earlier probably simply 'good fortune' came to refer to whatever brings fortune and hence to the rites and practices intended to assure good fortune. (Cousins 1996, 153)

Puñña clearly has a lengthy semantic trajectory. Above, Cousins explains the first two stages in this journey. The original meaning, he suggests, was simply 'good fortune.' This was then linked to good fortune as the product of rites and rituals of the kind performed by Brahmin priests. A further shift in meaning occurred when belief in karma became popular, and from this point *puñña* was associated primarily with karmic good fortune. It was belief in karma, we might say, that finally welded *kusala* and *puñña* together as cause and effect.

> In the Nikāyas, *puñña* is used in three ways. It refers to: i) a virtuous act (such as a donation to the *saṅgha*); ii) the metaphysical karmic 'force of goodness' generated by such acts; and iii) the resulting concrete 'good fortune' manifested in the form of health, wealth, and a good rebirth.

Puñña is the principal determinant of that dimension of well-being we have referred to as welfare or prudential good. The Buddha makes an association between *puñña* and prudential good when he equates *puñña* with whatever is 'happiness, pleasing, enjoyable, dear, and charming'.[3] Peter Harvey suggests an etymological connection between *puñña* and the English words 'boon' and 'bounty' (Harvey 2000, 18). Winston King, writing with reference to contemporary Burma, comments that 'merit' is 'one of the most ubiquitous words in Theravāda Buddhism'. He goes on to characterise it in the following terms:

> Merit ... is the totality of one's accumulated or stored-up goodness, which will manifest itself in good fortune of various kinds, both in this life and lives to come. Pleasures, success, health, friendships, those surprising items of good fortune which come unexpectedly like God's grace, and above all, happy rebirths, are the direct consequence of meritorious deeds. It may be

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[3] *Sukhassetaṃ, bhikkhave, adhivacanaṃ iṭṭhassa kantassa piyassa manāpassa* (Iti14).

considered to be the accumulated beneficial kammic force that virtuous actions and attitudes create and of which no man may have too much. It is the only coinage of any worth in paying one's passage to better existence in the future and carrying him on toward sainthood. (King 2001, 45)

Cousins notes that in a Buddhist context *puñña* is applied 'either to an act which brings good fortune or to the happy result in the future of such an act' (Cousins 1996, 155). We see here that *puñña* refers to both acts and their results, and in due course we will need to explain how this can be. Stephen Evans introduces a third element which he sees as central, namely a 'force of goodness' connecting act and result. He notes 'In the *Nikāyas* "*puñña*" almost always refers to the force of goodness generated by certain actions and issuing in pleasant karmic results' (Evans 2012, 514). Similarly, Peter Harvey notes:

> As an adjective, *puñña* can be seen as 'auspicious,' 'bringing good fortune,' hence 'karmically fruitful.' As a noun it refers to the auspicious, uplifting, purifying power of good actions to produce future happy results, or sometimes to such results themselves. (Harvey 2010, 200).

Harvey characterizes *puñña* as 'goodness power' and notes that the term 'emphasises the aspect of a good action that is its power to bring future happy karmic results' (Harvey 2010, 202). Other scholars concur. Martin Adam notes that *puñña* and *apuñña* refer to 'the potency of actions to produce positive and negative future experiences for the agent' (Adam 2005, 64). Schmithausen comments that 'entailing happiness' or 'beneficial' is 'at least *one* prominent shade of meaning, referring either to actions or attitudes conferring agreeable results in the afterlife or to the stored potency deriving from them (and occasionally even to the agreeable rebirth obtained thereby)' (Schmithausen 2013, 454 original emphasis).

Egge explains the meaning of *puñña* as follows:

> People obtain (*labhati*) and have (*puññavant-*) merit which is amassed (*cīyate, upacita*) to form a heap (*uccaya, nicaya, sañcaya*), a store (*nidhi*), a provision (*patheyya*) or an island (*dīpa*). The merit of one who does good is said to be difficult to measure; a good person is said to be full of merit. It is said that one's merits follow one to heaven like a shadow; alternatively, it is

said that one's merits receive one in heaven as do relatives. Merits are said to be helpers (*upakāra*), friends (*mitta*), or supporters (*patiṭṭha*) in the next world. Merits bring happiness (*sukāvaha*); they come (or return, *āgacchati*, *āgama*) to their maker, and persons and actions are said to share in merit (*puññabhāgin*). (Egge 2015, 21)

Egge speaks of 'an expansion in the semantic range of *puñña*' whereby '*puñña* denotes all beneficial actions and their proximate effects whether leading to a good rebirth or to nirvāṇa' (Egge 2015, 54).

Three Senses of *puñña*

Summarising the foregoing opinions, we see that in the Nikāyas *puñña* is used in three ways, to refer to:

  i) a virtuous act (such as a donation to the *saṅgha*)
 ii) the metaphysical karmic 'force of goodness' generated by such acts
iii) the resulting concrete 'good fortune' manifested in the form of health, wealth, a good rebirth, and other prudential goods. Such goods are referred to individually as *puññas* or collectively as *puñña*.

We can represent these three facets of *puñña* both diachronically and synchronically. In Figure 7.2 the three are shown diachronically in the causal and temporal order in which they occur.

While each of these three facets are designated as '*puñña*', the third (good fortune) seems logically prior to the other two. This is because if concrete instances of good fortune did not exist, it would make little sense to postulate a force of goodness that produces them (the second sense), or an act that generates that force of goodness (the first sense). The notion of a force of goodness, in fact, is really an explanation as to how i) and iii) are connected. Thus, a virtuous act is performed and later a pleasant result appears. The 'force of goodness' is the explanation of how the two are linked.

We can also represent these three facets of *puñña* in static form as three sides of a triangle as shown in Figure 7.3. This brings out better the fact that *puñña* is a multivalent term. Any one of the three meanings may take precedence according to context. This goes some way to explain the nebulous character of the term.

Figure 7.2: Three facets of *puñña* in diachronic order
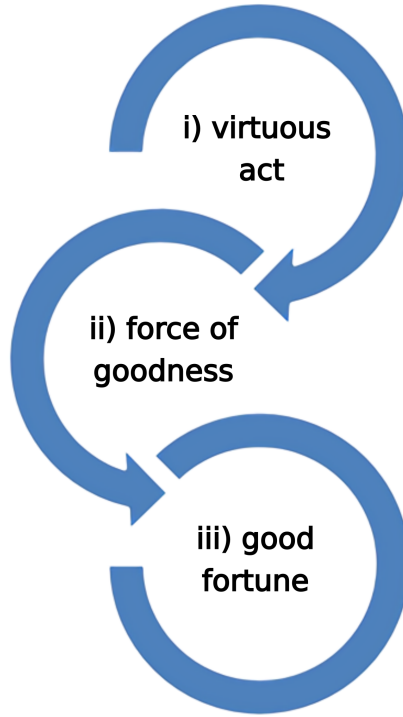
Synonyms

It is clear in Figure 7.3 why both the 'force of goodness' and 'good fortune' are called *puñña*, namely because they denote prudential good in its materialized or about-to-be-materialized form. But why are virtuous acts termed *puñña* or *puñña-kamma* rather than *kusala* or *kusala-kamma*? We promised to return to this question above, and the matter is puzzling since as Schmithausen notes, '*puñña* tends to be used . . . for the "stored beneficial potency", whereas *kusala* . . . is normally used to qualify the beneficial actions or attitudes themselves from which such potency results' (Schmithausen 2013, 454 n.83). Some have wondered whether the explanation for this overlap is that *kusala* and *puñña* are synonymous such that *puñña* can also mean *kusala*.

We suggest instead that the explanation for the overlap between *kusala* and *puñña* lies in the close *causal* connection between them. Given the belief in karma it is axiomatic that every virtuous (*kusala*) act is by nature also

Figure 7.3: Three facets of *puñña* in static form
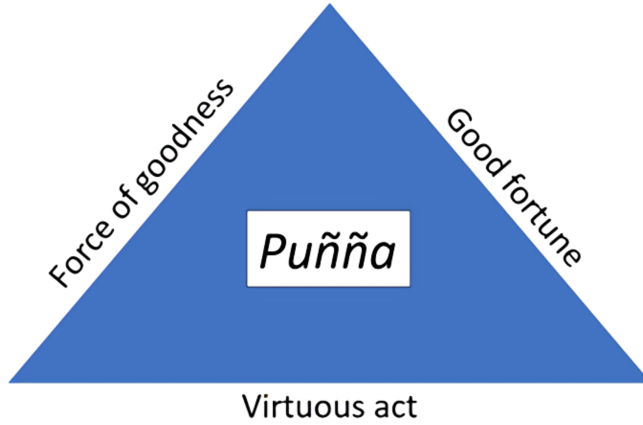
meritorious (*puñña*). Thus, an act of generosity is *kusala* and in addition has the property of generating *puñña*. As the *Udāna* (85) informs us, 'merit grows for the giver' (*dadato puññaṃ pavaḍḍhati*) (cf. DN ii.136:262). This principle of moral causation is formulated by the commentators as the axiom of *kamma-niyāma*. As Karunadasa helpfully informs us, this is the third of five aspects of the natural order as shown below:

1. Physical inorganic order (*utu-niyāma*), e.g., the unerring order of seasons, the causes of winds and rains.
2. Physical organic order (*bīja-niyāma*), e.g., the order of germs and seeds, the peculiar characteristics of certain fruits.
3. Moral order (*kamma-niyāma*), e.g., the causal order of kammic acts and their results (*vipāka*).
4. Psychological order (*citta-niyāma*), e.g., the arising of cognitive acts as a patterned continuum wherein the immediately succeeding one is conditioned by the immediately preceding one.
5. Spiritual order (*dhamma-niyāma*), e.g., specific phenomena arising at the advent of a bodhisatta in his last birth. (Karunadasa 2017, 87)

Buddhaghosa explains the third, *kamma-niyāma*, as 'the giving of pleasant results to a virtuous person, and the giving of unpleasant results to an unvirtuous person'.[4] *Kamma-niyāma* thus recognizes a necessary connection

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[4]*Tattha kusalassa iṭṭhavipākadānaṃ, akusalassa aniṭṭhavipākadānanti ayaṃ kammaniyāmo* (Sv ii.432)

between virtue and prudential good, which, moreover, is based on a principle of proportionality: pleasant and unpleasant results (*vipāka*) arise in proportion to the moral worth of the actions performed.

Since every morally good (*kusala*) act is necessarily meritorious (*puñña*), it is possible to characterise a morally good act in two ways, either as virtuous or meritorious. An act of charity, for example, is both virtuous and meritorious, so an observer of such an act might think 'X has done a virtuous deed' or 'X has done a meritorious deed'. Both would be true since the act has these twin properties. To illustrate the point further let us take the example of an act with two negative properties. Theft is both immoral and a crime, so an observer of a theft might think 'X has committed an immoral act' or 'X has committed a crime'. Again, both are true. The point, however, is that 'immoral' and 'crime' are not synonymous terms. They pick out different aspects of the badness of one and the same act. The same applies in the case of 'virtuous' (*kusala*) and 'meritorious' (*puñña*). These adjectives pick out different senses of the goodness of the act, namely its moral and prudential goodness, respectively.

Cousins does not take *puñña* as a synonym for *kusala*. When *puñña* is used of an act, he proposes the translation 'fortune-bringing action' (Cousins 1996, 137). Peter Harvey, too, proposes '(an act of) karmic fruitfulness' as a translation of *puñña* (Harvey 2000, 18). On this account, a *puñña-kamma* is not a 'virtuous action', synonymous with *kusala-kamma*, but an act that brings 'good fortune'. Egge remarks, 'While *puññaṃ karoti* could also be construed to mean "one does a good deed," or "one does well," the verb *pasavati* implies an understanding of *puñña* as the effect of action, and other usages confirm this interpretation' (Egge 2015, 21). He notes, 'I have found only one didactic verse that describes acts themselves as *puñña*' (Egge 2015, 129 n.43). It is, of course, understood that acts that produce *puñña* are *kusala*, but this is not the same as being synonymous. Perhaps we could describe them, as does Schmithausen, as 'quasi-synonyms'. He writes: '*puñña* creates no problem as a quasi-synonym of *kusala* if 'wholesome' is accepted as the literal meaning of *kusala* and as long as *kusala* is applied to the karmic perspective' (Schmithausen 2013, 454).

The Problem of *Puñña*

It is in the commentaries that we see the clearest evidence that the meaning of *kusala* and *puñña* has converged. As Evans informs us, '*Puñña-kamma* scarcely appears at all in the *Nikāyas*, though it is not uncommon in the commentaries' (Evans 2012, 525). Egge informs us that Dhammapāla in his

Paramatthadīpanī commentary glosses *puñña* as 'good conduct' (*sucarita*) and 'virtuous action' (*kusala-kamma*), and gives an etymology for *puñña* as meaning it 'purifies' (*punāti*) the mental continuum in which it arises (Egge 2015, 90). We would expect this to be said of *kusala*, not *puñña*.

This development may explain the commentarial invention of *kiriya,* or the class of 'functional' mental formations thought to be peculiar to the *arahant*. We may speculate that *kiriya* was invented by the Abhidhamma to solve what might be called 'the problem of *puñña*'. The problem arises because it is stated in the Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN ii.82:588) that the *arahant* does not produce 'meritorious mental formations' (*puññābhisaṅkhāra*). We understand this to mean something quite straightforward, namely that the *arahant* does not pursue prudential good as a primary objective.

The Niddesa, however, a later text that takes the form of a commentary on the Sutta Nipāta, understands *puñña* as synonymous with *kusala*, an assumption that leads to the logical but radical conclusion that the *arahant* does not produce *virtuous* mental formations (*kusalābhisaṅkhāra*). From here, the commentators apparently reasoned that if the mental formations of the *arahant* are not *kusala*, they must be of some other kind, and the name they gave to this morally transcendent class of mental formations was *kiriya*. The commentarial solution to the problem of *puñña*, then, was to classify the *arahant* as a unique moral agent. The point of departure for this conclusion, as noted, is the erroneous premise that *puñña* is synonymous with *kusala*.[5] This is the genesis of the orthodox notion that the *arahant* attains a 'supramundane state beyond good and evil' and that there exists a third, transcendent, level of moral practice.[6]

Apart from this terminological confusion, there are other reasons why the commentarial opinion is mistaken about the nature of *puñña*. The Buddha specifically tells the monks not to fear *puñña* (Iti 14), and always speaks of it in positive terms rather than as something he has transcended or left behind. In the last chapter, we discussed the Buddha's *puñña*, and there is little to suggest that the Buddha ceased to produce *puñña* in his awakened state. To the contrary, we read that 'the noble one generates abundant merit' (*pahūtamariyo pakaroti puññaṃ* (AN iv.151:1112). This explains why many of the prudential goods the Buddha possessed – such as authority, honour, fame, and reputation – increased rather than decreased during his post-

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[5]According to Niddesa 1.89: '*Puñña* means any *kusala* mental formation in the three realms. *Apuñña* means whatever is not *kusala*' (*puññaṃ vuccati yaṃ kiñci tedhātukaṃ kusalābhisaṅkhāraṃ, apuññaṃ vuccati sabbaṃ akusalaṃ*).

[6]For this reason, Kv 541 rejects the suggestion of the Andhakas that an *arahant* can accumulate merit.

awakening career as a religious teacher. This is difficult to explain on the orthodox view.

A second reason is that it is a requirement of natural law that *kusala* produces *puñña*. There is no reason to think the operation of this law would be superseded by the Buddha's awakening. His conduct remained subject to the moral law just as his body remained subject to the law of gravity. The operation of *kamma-niyāma* would ensure that any good deeds the Buddha performed would inevitably produce beneficial results. As the Dhammapada has it, 'He who speaks or acts from a pure mind, that one happiness follows as his shadow that never leaves him' (Dhp 2). It would be hard to find a purer mind that that of the Buddha.

> It is a requirement of natural law (Dhamma) that *kusala* produces *puñña*. There is no reason to think the operation of this law would be superseded by the Buddha's awakening.

A third reason concerns desire. The reason no new *puñña* is produced by the awakened, it is commonly believed, is because they act without desire. Yet there is no reason to think that the awakened transcend desire. On the contrary, the Lakkhaṇa Sutta tells us that the awakened desire the well-being of all. We read that '[T]he *Tathāgata* … desired the welfare of the many, their advantage, comfort, freedom from bondage, thinking how they might increase in faith, morality, learning, renunciation, in Dhamma, in wisdom, in wealth and possessions, in bipeds and quadrupeds, in wives and children, in servants, workers and helpers, in relatives, friends and acquaintances' (DN iii.164:452). We discussed the nature of desire in Chapter 2, where we distinguished between craving and aspiration. What the awakened have transcended is not desire but *desire for what is not good* and what does not enhance well-being. Most basically, this is desire born of greed, hatred, and delusion, in other words, *taṇhā*.

As mentioned in our discussion of the Second Noble Truth, *taṇhā* is disordered or unwholesome desire. *Puñña* should not be seen as the inevitable consequence of desire and as such to be eliminated, but as the positive outcome of desire for the good. To assume that the cessation of desire puts an end to rebirth by eliminating *puñña* is a misconception. *Puñña* does not cause rebirth, it just makes it more pleasant. What causes rebirth is the failure to achieve perfection in virtue. Rather than conceive of *puñña* in negative terms we should think of it as the positive feedback the virtuous person receives from the natural order. If we accept the unified conception

of well-being described in the last chapter there is no 'problem of *puñña*' to resolve. Like other practitioners the awakened produce virtuous (*kusala*) mental formations and generate prudential good (*puñña*) in accordance with the law of *kamma-niyāma*.

4 Summary

The chapter began by suggesting that the attempt by Horner and Cousins to impose a technical or instrumental meaning on *kusala* was unjustified. Some contemporary writers favour the translation 'wholesome', a term that straddles the moral and prudential senses of the good. While appropriate in some contexts, and a clear improvement on 'skilful', 'wholesome' is not a common term in ethical discourse and is constrained by its association with health and nutrition. The translation 'wholesome habits' suggests a healthy regime of diet and exercise (hence pertaining to bodily well-being) when what is meant by *kusalā sīlā* is virtuous conduct.

Unlike the Rhys Davids, contemporary translators continue to shy away from conventional moral terminology. In this they are influenced, perhaps, by a desire to distance Buddhism from Christianity and to emphasise, by means of proprietary terminology, the supposedly *sui generis* nature of Buddhist ethics. It should be recognised, however, that such terminology comes with its own agenda. The agenda in Horner's case was to portray Buddhist ethics as based on reason as a kind of oriental counterpart to Kant. To bring Buddhism further into line with Enlightenment values, the more 'medieval' aspects of its teachings are regularly downplayed by modernist interpreters. The metaphysical moral law of karma, for instance, is routinely compared to a law of science.

Following discussion of *kusala* we distinguished three senses of *puñña* in early Buddhism. The primary meaning is 'good fortune' or prudential good. A second is 'goodness power', or the metaphysical force that brings good fortune into being. We saw that in rare cases '*puñña*' qualifies the fortune-bringing acts (*puñña-kamma*) that generate the force of goodness. Properly speaking, of course, *puñña* does not generate *puñña*. It is because deeds have the property of being *kusala* that they create *puñña*. The overlap has sometimes been interpreted as showing that *puñña* is synonymous with *kusala*, but there is little evidence that this is the case.

The connection between *kusala* and *puñña* is best seen as causal rather than semantic. Buddhism understands *puñña* as arising from a moral cause: *kusala* is the cause and *puñña* is the effect. Thus, while *puñña* is causally

dependent on *kusala* it is ontologically separate. We described the relation as a partnership between the moral and prudential forms of the good. In this respect, we might describe *puñña* as an epiphenomenon of *kusala* and compare the relation between them to that of a lamp and its light. A lamp and its light are causally related but ontologically separate. Here *kusala* is the lamp (the cause) and *puñña* is the light (the effect). The lamp causes the light, but the light is not the lamp. To vary the image, we could say that *puñña* is like the halo of a saint in being the adornment proper to a virtuous person. We have also characterised *puñña* as the 'positive feedback' provided by the natural order on the performance of good deeds.

> While *kamma* can be good or bad, *puñña* refers exclusively to the result of good *kamma*. *Puñña* has the sense of *deserved* good fortune or *merited* prudential good. This is because it is the product of a *moral* law, not a non-moral law like the law of gravity.

Earlier we referred to disagreements among scholars concerning the meaning of *kusala* and *puñña*. Evans refers to a 'running debate' on the question of their meaning and relationship (Evans 2012, 514). Some have suggested that the distinction between *kusala* and *puñña* turns on the motivation of the agent and her stage of spiritual development (Adam 2005). Others regard *puñña* as an 'instrumental' or oblique means to virtue in contrast to 'teleological' actions that directly manifest 'nirvanic virtues' (Vélez 2004). Such conceptions arise from a two-level conception of well-being of the kind envisioned by Kammatic and Nibbānic Buddhism. If we reject this two-level conception in favour of a unified theory of well-being there is no reason to see *kusala* and *puñña* as opposed.

It may seem we have spent a long time discussing terminological nuances. The terminology is important, however, because the way we translate *kusala* has a bearing on how we understand the role of agency in Buddhist ethics. This will become clearer in our discussion of Eudaimonism (Chapter 9) and Consequentialism (Chapter 10). To anticipate, if *kusala* means 'skill' it follows that nirvana is a product of skill in the way that a pot is a product of the potter's art. Thus, skill is one thing, nirvanic well-being another. This leads to a consequentialist model of Buddhist ethics in terms of which the goal is conceived as a product rather than part of the path. On the eudaimonist model, by contrast, the actions of the agent (including her motivation, intentions, and choices) are *constitutive* of her well-being. Eudaimonists see happiness as a property of moral goodness, not a manufactured outcome

produced by art or skill. Instead, they locate happiness in the *living* of a certain kind of life, the life of virtue.

5 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- *Kusala* and *puñña* are key terms for understanding Buddhist ethics.
- *Kusala* is a term of approbation with a broad semantic range, like 'good.'
- Buddhaghosa distinguishes three senses of *kusala*, but only two are common in the Nikāyas. These are *kusala* in the sense of moral goodness (virtue) and *kusala* in the instrumental sense of skill (what is good for some purpose). These are the only two senses that need concern us.
- The appropriate sense of *kusala* must be determined from the context. In particular, the instrumental and moral senses should not be confused (virtue is not a skill, and a skill is not a virtue).
- There may be ideological reasons why the translation of *kusala* as 'skilful' became popular, such as to portray Buddhist ethics as distinct from Christian theism.
- The basic meaning of *puñña* is 'good fortune.'
- In the Nikāyas, *puñña* is used in three ways to mean: i) a fortune-bringing act (such as a good deed); ii) the karmic 'force of goodness' generated by such acts; and iii) the resulting 'good fortune' manifested in the form of health, wealth, a good rebirth, and other prudential goods.
- *Kusala* and *puñña* are not synonymous. They are related in two ways: conceptually, as different aspects of the good; and causally, in that *kusala* is the cause of *puñña*.
- The causal relationship between *kusala* and *puñña* is known as *kamma-niyāma* and is one of five orders of natural law.
- Contrary to the orthodox Theravāda position the volitions of the *arahant* are *kusala* and the awakened continue to produce *puñña*.

Discussion Questions

1. What are three common senses of *kusala*?
2. Why is *kusala* commonly translated as 'skilful'?
3. What are three common senses of *puñña*?
4. Should Buddhists try to create *puñña* or eliminate it?
5. Explain the law of *kamma-niyāma*. Is it like the law of gravity?
6. Are the volitions of the awakened *kusala* or *kiriya*?

Further Reading

- *Adam, Martin. 'Groundwork for a Metaphysic of Buddhist Morals: A New Analysis of *Puñña* and *Kusala*, in Light of *Sukka*.' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 12 (2005): 61–85.
- Cousins, L. S. "Good or Skilful? *Kusala* in Canon and Commentary." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 136–64.
- Schmithausen, Lambert L. '*Kuśala* and *Akuśala*: Reconsidering the Original Meaning of a Basic Pair of Terms of Buddhist Spirituality and Ethics and Its Development up to Early *Yogācāra*.' In *The Foundation for Yoga Practitioners: The Buddhist Yogācārabhūmi Treatise and Its Adaptation in India, East Asia, and Tibet*, edited by Kragh, Ulrich Timme, 440–95. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013.
- Vélez de Cea, Abraham. 'The Criteria of Goodness in the Pāli Nikāyas and the Nature of Buddhist Ethics.' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 11 (2004): 123–42.

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8 Beyond Good and Evil

1 In this Chapter

As discussed in previous chapters, a common misunderstanding is that Buddhism sees morality (*sīla*) as a 'worldly' affair that must sooner or later be left behind by those who seek the highest form of well-being (nirvana). The reasoning is that morally good action creates *puñña*, and *puñña* leads to rebirth. To cease creating *puñña*, then, morality must be abandoned or transcended. We explored the genesis of this idea in the last chapter, and it is thought to be supported by evidence of various kinds, such as: 1) the canonical distinction between worldly (*lokiya*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) religious practice; 2) the raft parable; 3) canonical statements that the *arahant* passes 'beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*'; 4) references to karma as 'neither black nor white'; 5) *arahant* suicide; and 6) the concept of skilful means. In this chapter we explore each of these in turn.

In Chapter 4, we promised to return to a passage in Saddhatissa's *Buddhist Ethics* which stated, 'according to Buddhist and other Indian thought the highest state is one which lies beyond good and evil' (Saddhatissa 1987, 12). On the following page he refers again to a 'supramundane state beyond good and evil' (Saddhatissa 1987, 13). He also characterises the 'highest' or 'ideal' state of nirvana in this life as 'transcendental' (Saddhatissa 1987, 24). Winston King similarly speaks of 'the saint's complete transcendence of the moral order' (King 2001, 30).

Both authors make clear they are not suggesting that the awakened person becomes like Gyges, whom we met in Chapter 1, and who used his magical power to perform immoral deeds. Saddhatissa states ' It must be emphasized at the outset that recognition of a state beyond good and evil in no way implies that a person who has performed a number of "good" deeds may then relax morally and do anything he pleases' (Saddhatissa 1987, 13). King also makes clear that 'nibbānic good is not licentious or antinomian' (King

2001, 103). Unfortunately, neither of these authors explains in what sense the practice of virtue in the Eightfold Path culminates in transmoral action.

Statements which describe the awakened as passing 'beyond good and evil' while simultaneously insisting there is no discontinuity with conventional moral norms are confusing. It appears that either certain teachings are contradictory, or they have been misinterpreted. Let us see if we can determine which it is. Opinions of the kind mentioned commonly find support in one or more of the six sources considered below.

2 'Worldly' and 'Supramundane'

The Mahācattārīsaka Sutta or Discourse on the Great Forty (MN 117) is sometimes read as supporting a *kamma-nibbāna* dichotomy in view of the distinction it makes between three different attitudes towards religious belief and practice. The Buddha distinguishes between wrong belief and two kinds of right belief in relation to the factors of the Eightfold Path. For example, wrong belief in relation to the first factor of the Path (Right View) is the view of those who deny validity to moral and religious practice, believing 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions' (MN iii.71;934).

> Confusion can arise from statements in the secondary literature which describe the awakened as passing 'beyond good and evil' and yet insist there is 'no break' with ordinary morality.

The Buddha then distinguishes between worldly right view and supramundane right view. Worldly right view is described as the opposite of wrong view, namely 'There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed; there is fruit and result of good and bad actions. This first form of right view is 'worldly' in that it is 'affected by taints, partaking of merit (*puññabhāgiya*), ripening on the side of attachment' (MN iii.72;935). The second kind of right view is 'the path factor of right view in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path: this is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path' (MN iii.72;935). The same threefold classification is repeated in respect of the remaining seven items of the Eightfold Path.

It is often assumed that the identification of two kinds of right view in this *sutta* signals the recognition, and perhaps the endorsement, of two distinct forms of religious practice (Kammatic and Nibbānic) in which morality as

the first and lower kind of 'right view' is relegated to the 'worldly' sphere. This is not the best way to interpret the text. On the contrary, the point of the distinction between the two kinds of right view is to emphasise the superior and inclusive nature of the second.

Wrong view, according to the *sutta,* is the denial of religious values, specifically the fact that religious and moral actions have consequences (*akiriyavāda*). The first kind of right view is the acknowledgement that religious and moral actions *do* have consequences, in other words acceptance of the doctrine of karma (*kiriyavāda*). The superiority of the second kind of right view is that it supplements moral virtue with epistemic virtue in the practice of the Eightfold Path. It is this specific configuration of virtue that is said to be *lokuttara* and to lead to the end of rebirth. Things are *lokuttara,* says Buddhaghosa, by virtue of being associated with the Noble Path and its fruits (PS i.196). Outside the context of the Eightfold Path, ethics is indeed a 'mundane' activity which by itself it will not put an end to rebirth. It will lead to *puñña* but not beyond. It is crucial to realise, however, that the supramundane path *also* produces *puñña* because *puñña* arises inexorably in accordance with the universal law of *kamma-niyāma.*

The rationale for this is made clearer in the discussion of the three possible attitudes towards Right Speech, Action, and Livelihood. The first and worst attitude towards these things is to speak, act and live in ways that breach the precepts. The second or 'worldly' right attitude is to observe the precepts and live an upright moral life. The third or 'supramundane' right attitude is to observe the precepts as part of the Eightfold Path. This does not involve passing beyond ethics to the higher value of wisdom and leaving morality behind. It is in the Eightfold Path that the moral behaviour defined as Right Speech, Action and Livelihood find fulfilment and become supramundane, as we see in the case of Right Speech:

> And what, bhikkhus, is right speech that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path? The desisting from the four kinds of verbal misconduct, the abstaining, refraining, abstinence from them in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path: this is right speech that is noble...a factor of the path. (MN iii.74:936f)

In the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta the Buddha is not setting out two alternative paths for his followers. Instead he is making quite clear that there is only *one* path which deserves to be followed, namely the third in which virtuous conduct is conjoined with wisdom. In sum, the three kinds of attitude described

in the text belong to those who a) deny the existence of karma (*akiriyavāda*); b) those who believe in karma (*kiriyavāda*); and c) followers of the Eightfold Path. These views are held by a) those who are without *sīla;* b) those who possess *sīla* alone; and c) those who possess both *sīla* and *paññā*.

> In the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta the Buddha is not setting out two alternative paths for his followers, one *lokiya* (for laity) and the other *lokuttara* (for monks). Instead he is making quite clear that there is only *one* path which deserves to be followed, namely the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Eightfold Path is the cornerstone of Buddhism - not in the detail or order of its eight items but in its bilateral strategy for perfection as described in Chapter 4. Only when seen in this light can we understand the Buddha's condemnation of religious teachings which do not contain the Eightfold Path (DN ii.151:268). He is not disparaging other traditions for the lack of a particular eight-limbed formula but pointing out that teachings that do not encourage the cultivation of both morality and wisdom will not lead to salvation.

To sum up, in the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta the Buddha is stating that all who follow the Eightfold Path are pursuing a form of well-being that is *lokuttara*. Those who pursue worldly (*lokiya*) values exclusively are not following the Eightfold Path, they are doing something else.

3 The Raft Parable

The raft parable is commonly interpreted to mean that the attainment of nirvana involves the transcendence of good and evil. This interpretation derives from the Buddha's remarks at the end of the parable, which are translated by Horner as follows:

> Even so, monks, is the parable of the Raft Dhamma taught by me for crossing over, not for retaining. You, monks, by understanding the Parable of the Raft, should get rid even of (right) mental objects, all the more of wrong ones. (MN i.135:229)

Largely on the basis of these two sentences the notion has gained acceptance that ethics in Buddhism has only a provisional and instrumental status and must be discarded when it has fulfilled its function of ferrying

the practitioner to the further shore of enlightenment. Just as, it is suggested, no-one would be foolish enough to carry around a raft after fording a stream, so those who have crossed over leave behind the burden of the normative ethical injunctions which facilitated their passage.

This view has been expressed regularly since Horner first stated it concisely in 1950 as follows:

> Morality is to be left behind . . . like a raft once the crossing over has been safely accomplished. In other words, the *arahat* is above good and evil, and has transcended both. (Horner 1950, 1)

This interpretation of the raft parable does not seem compatible with the cumulative and progressive structure of the path to perfection taught by the Buddha. It is unclear why the adept would reject the moral virtues he had cultivated to the point where they had become second nature. It would be like rejecting a part of himself. Furthermore, the interpretation of the raft parable suggested by Horner and others finds little support when placed in context.

The symbolism of the parable is helpfully spelt out in the Saṃyutta Nikāya; the water is the 'four floods'; the near shore is belief in a self (*sakkāya*)*;* the further shore is nirvana*;* the raft is the Eightfold Path; and the man who has crossed over is the *arahant* (SN iv.174f:1238f). There is no mention here of the raft being left behind. This would make little sense, since as we saw in Chapter 2 the Eightfold Path and nirvana are one and the same.

In fact, the gaining of the further shore is explicitly identified with moral perfection in the form of the Ten Good Paths of Action:

> Master Gotama, what is the near shore? What is the far shore? . . . Brahmin, (1) the destruction of life is the near shore, abstention from the destruction of life the far shore. (2) Taking what is not given is the near shore, abstention from taking what is not given the far shore. (3) Sexual misconduct . . . (4) False speech . . . (5) Divisive speech . . . (6) Harsh speech . . . (7) Idle chatter . . . (8) Longing . . . (9) Ill will . . . (10) Wrong view is the near shore, right view the far shore. The one, brahmin, is the near shore, the other the far shore. (AN v.252:1510)

It is clear here that *sīla* is part of the further shore and is not left behind on the near side after enlightenment. In almost all passages that use the imagery

of crossing a river or stream, the further shore is a way of life in accordance
with the Dhamma, in other words the implementation and practice of the
Buddha's teachings. The Buddha is one of those who have 'crossed over'
(*tiṇṇa*) (DN iii.55:393), and among the characteristics of such a person are
exalted moral qualities such as harmlessness and compassion (Sn 515). Why,
then, does the Buddha make a reference to 'crossing over but not retaining',
and speak of 'leaving behind both *dhammā* and *adhammā?* The answer
must be sought in the context in which this passage occurs, and this will
reveal that the Buddha was using the parable to make a specific point about
religious practice. His remarks are best understood not in the sense that his
ethical teachings are to be transcended, but as a warning against *misuse* of
the Dhamma.

The raft parable occurs in the Alagaddūpama Sutta or Discourse of the
Parable of the Water Snake (MN 22) and it is helpful to read it in this context.
The first section tells the story of the incorrigible monk Ariṭṭha; the second is
a stock passage on the danger of the mastery of scripture for the wrong ends;
the third is the raft parable, and the final section discusses a number of false
views about the self. We are concerned only with the first three sections.

> The Buddha's remarks at the end of the raft parable are
> best understood not in the sense that his ethical teach-
> ings are to be transcended, but as a warning against the
> *misuse* of the Dhamma.

In the first part of the *sutta* the Buddha censures Ariṭṭha for stubbornly
holding a wrong view of Dhamma, namely that (according to the commen-
tary) sexual intercourse was no sin for a monk (PS i.103). The second section
of the *sutta* is a stock passage on mastery of the Dhamma, and it is here
that the simile of the water-snake is introduced. This passage describes how
certain 'foolish men' master Dhamma - here meaning the scriptures - for
the wrong reasons. The Buddha says these foolish men 'learn the Dhamma
only for the sake of criticising others and for winning in debates.' We can
image these 'foolish men' as monks who quote scripture merely to impress
an audience. Such foolish men, says the Buddha, have 'a wrong grasp of
things' (MN i.133:227).

It is worth noting that in this passage on scripture the Buddha does not
contrast a wrong grasp of Dhamma with its transcendence, but with a right
grasp of it (*suggahītattā*). He opposes the misuse of scripture to the correct
use of it. Accordingly, some 'young men of good family', in contrast to
the 'foolish men' grasp Dhamma aright, and as a result arrive at the goal of

the religious life. After warning against the misuse of scripture the Buddha compares the danger of grasping Dhamma wrongly to the danger of grasping a water-snake at the wrong end. One who does so and is bitten suffers agony or death 'because of grasping the water-snake wrongly' (*duggahītattā... alagadassa*).

The third section in the Discourse is the raft parable, and it appears that it, like the first two sections, is concerned with illustrating the danger of a wrong grasp of good things rather than advocating their transcendence. The parable describes how a traveller reaches a great waterway whose further bank is safe and secure but whose nearer bank is dangerous and frightening. To get to the other side the traveller makes a raft and propels himself across using his hands and feet as paddles. The question the Buddha then raises is whether it would be appropriate for the man to continue on his journey carrying the raft with him. The reply is that it would not, and the Buddha sums up saying: 'Monks, I have taught you Dhamma in the Parable of the Raft, for crossing over with not for grasping hold of.'

> The raft parable is addressing the problem of attachment and fixation upon the Dhamma or certain aspects of it, not repudiating the Dhamma with its ethical teachings in favour of a state 'beyond good and evil'.

The word 'grasping' (*gahaṇa*) echoes the 'wrong grasp' (*duggahita*) of the teaching by Ariṭṭha, and also the 'wrong grasp of the scriptures' (*duggahītattā dhammānam*) by the foolish men who master them for the wrong purpose. The Buddha is saying that he has taught Dhamma in the raft parable so that people will realise that his teachings are to be used for the purpose he intended, namely reaching salvation, and not for anything else. It is a warning not to twist and pervert the teachings to gratify personal desires, be it for carnal pleasure as in Ariṭṭha's case, or 'reproaching and gossiping' in the case of the foolish men. This theme has nothing to do with transcendence: it is simply a warning not to misuse the teachings.

So much for the general sense of the parable. We may enquire further, however, as to the precise meaning of the Buddha's concluding remark: 'Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft you should abandon even good things (*dhammā*), how much more so evil things (*adhammā*).' The commentary takes this in the sense of abandoning attachment to good states of mind, but it seems from the context that the Buddha is warning not about attachment but the *misuse* of good things. He is warn-

ing monks against the danger of allowing particular doctrines, practices, teachings or philosophical views (*dhammā*) to become a fetish.

In sum, the teachings are good but Ariṭṭha distorts them. The scriptures are good, but people twist them to their own ends. The raft is good but becomes a handicap if picked up and carried around. The theme of the Discourse of the Parable of the Water Snake and of the raft parable is accordingly not moral transcendence but a warning that even good things (*dhammā*) can be misused. The raft parable does not imply that the Dhamma with its moral teachings must be jettisoned in favour of a state 'beyond good and evil'.

4 'Beyond *Puñña* and *Pāpa*'

How are we to understand the claim that the *arahant* transcends *puñña* and *pāpa*, a proposition affirmed in many places in the secondary literature? Peter Harvey frames the issue as follows:

> At the culmination of the Noble Eightfold Path stands the *Arahat*, who is actually said to have 'passed beyond' *puñña* and *pāpa* (Sn.636) and to have 'abandoned them' (Sn.520): 'Not clinging to karmically fruitful or deadening actions, he abandons what has been taken up, and does not fashion (anything more) here' (Sn.790). He or she constructs no karmically fruitful or unfruitful actions (*S*.II.82). What could this mean? (Harvey 2000, 43)

This question has puzzled scholars. While some have taken the passages cited to mean that the *arahant* 'transcends good and evil' others have been less sure. P.D. Premasiri was among the first to realize that this interpretation was problematic since as he rightly observed, 'there is no instance in the Pali Canon where an *arahant* is said to have discarded both *kusala* and *akusala*' (Premasiri 1975, 41). This is a pertinent observation, because it is difficult to see how the *arahant* could transcend 'good and evil' without also transcending *kusala* and *akusala*. There is abundant textual evidence that the Buddha never transcended *kusala* at any stage of his career. It therefore makes little sense to describe him as having gone beyond 'good'. He had not transcended moral goodness so much as fulfilled it. What he had 'gone beyond' was the possibility of evil (*akusala*).

The *Puñña* and *Pāpa* Passages (PPP)

The notion that the *arahant* transcends *puñña* and *pāpa* is reportedly affirmed in textual passages. Those commonly cited total six in number, and we can refer to them as the '*puñña* and *pāpa* passages' (PPP for short). The six short passages are shown below.[1]

1. One who is peaceful, having abandoned *puñña* and *pāpa*, dustless, having understood this world and the next; who has transcended birth and death, such a one is truly called an ascetic. (Sn 520)

2. Just as a lovely white lotus is not tainted by the water, so too you are not tainted either by *puñña and pāpa*. Extend your feet, O hero: Sabhiya pays homage to the Teacher. (Sn 547)

3. One who here has transcended ties, as well as both *puñña and pāpa*, who is sorrowless, dustless, and pure: he is the one I call a Brahmin. (Sn 636)

4. A brahmin does not speak of purity by another, by the seen and the heard, by good behavior and observances, by the sensed. Untainted by *puñña and pāpa*, he has discarded what was taken up without creating anything here. (Sn 790)

5. There is no fear for one whose thought is untroubled (by faults), whose thought is unagitated, who is freed from *puñña and pāpa*, who is awake. (Dhp 39)

6. But whoever has put aside *puñña and pāpa*, a liver of the holy life, wanders the world carefully, he indeed is called a bhikkhu. (Dhp 267)

The first point to note is that in none of these passages does the word *arahant* appear. This is a little surprising, given that they are thought to say something important about *arahant* ethics. Could it be that the passages refer to *arahant*s indirectly? Passage 2, for example, refers to the Buddha as teacher (*satthar*) and the Buddha is an *arahant*. On the other hand, there seems no reason to think that the '*bhikkhu*' who is the subject of passage 6 is an *arahant*. Given the absence of any explicit reference to *arahants* it seems worth considering alternative interpretations. Our suggestion is that the PPP do not refer specifically to *arahants* but to the broader class of Buddhist renouncers.

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[1]Translations from the Suttanipāta are by Bhikkhu Bodhi and from the Dhammapada by K.R. Norman. Both have been amended slightly by leaving the phrase '*puñña and pāpa*' untranslated.

Renouncers and Householders

First, a word about the sources. Reviewing the six passages we see that four are from a single source (the Suttanipāta) and the remaining two are from one other (the Dhammapada). This means that talk of 'going beyond *puñña* and *pāpa'* is confined to a narrow segment of canonical literature. Moreover, both sources are in verse and are thought to be 'among the most ancient specimens of Buddhist literature' (Bodhi 2017, 13). This suggests we are dealing with views expressed in a correspondingly early stage in the evolution of the *saṅgha.*

We noted previously (Chapter 7) the suggestion by Cousins that one sense of *puñña*, perhaps the original one, is simply 'good fortune.' If the chronology he proposed has any merit it seems likely that the PPP would be more likely than later sources to reflect this meaning. If the meaning of *puñña* in these passages is simply 'good fortune', it seems logical to assume that the meaning of its opposite – *pāpa* – is 'bad fortune'. Assuming such to be the sense of *puñña* and *pāpa* in the PPP, what links the various individuals who are said to have 'gone beyond good and bad fortune'? The unifying feature seems to be that they are all members of the class of renouncer. This is confirmed by the terminology used to describe them: they are referred to as monk (*bhikkhu*), *brahmin* (twice), renunciant (*samaṇa*) or teacher (*satthar*). It seems reasonable to suppose that 'the one who is awake' (passage 5) is also a religious seeker or renouncer. Passage 6 explicitly tells us that the one who has put aside *puñña* and *pāpa* 'wanders the world'.

> The one who goes 'beyond *puñña* and *pāpa'* is not the *arahant* but the renouncer.

What, then, is the 'good and bad fortune' that the wanderer 'goes beyond'? Surely it is that bound up with the 'close and dusty' life of the householder with its worldly cares and concerns (DN i.63;99). Renunciation of the household life is a central theme of the Suttanipāta as can be seen from the forty verses devoted to the ideal of the rhinoceros horn. For example: 'Having cast off the marks of a layman … clothed in ochre robes, having renounced, one should live alone like a rhinoceros horn' (Sn 64). The contrast between those who have 'gone beyond *puñña* and *pāpa'* and those who have not, then, appears to be sociological rather than ethical in nature.

The non-renouncer is by definition a worldly person. Perhaps we could picture him as the householder whose daily life would involve what Cousins called 'the rites and practices intended to assure good fortune,' in other words, the performance of rituals, prayers and sacrifices designed to produce

good fortune (*puñña*) in the form of sons, cattle, and wealth, and to ward off misfortune and bad luck (*pāpa*). The contrast the PPP bring out is between the worldly householder, whose life continues to revolve around fortune and gain (*lābha*), and the renouncer who follows the path of *brahmacariya*. The contrast, as one verse puts it, is between 'the layman supporting a wife and the ascetic owning nothing' (Sn 220). The Dhammapada makes this contrast explicit:

> There is one means for getting gain [*lābha*], another means for going to *nibbāna*. Thus having learned this, let the bhikkhu, the follower of the Buddha, not rejoice in honour. Let him practise seclusion. (Dhp 75)

'Gain' (*lābha*) and 'honour' (*sakkāra*) are forms of worldly good fortune, as we observed in Chapter 5, and the compound *lābha-sakkāra* often does duty for the whole complex of prudential good. The renouncer, through his commitment to the spiritual life of *brahmacariya*, has 'gone beyond' such secular concerns. Early sources like the Theragāthā and Therīgāthā contain numerous examples of individuals who joyfully exchanged the trials and tribulation of the household life for the happiness of renunciation. Whether or not these examples reflect a widespread practice is open to debate, but the passages quoted (and many others in these early collections) are affirming that while the happiness of the householder remains bound up with worldly good and bad fortune (*puñña* and *pāpa*), the happiness of the renunciate does not. This is the simple and straightforward sense in which the renunciate has 'gone beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*.' The subject of the PPP is thus the Buddhist *renouncer* and not the *arahant*.

> The PPP are affirming that while the happiness of the householder remains bound up with worldly good and bad fortune (*puñña* and *pāpa*), the happiness of the renouncer does not.

In sum, the PPP simply affirm – often in the face of hostility from Brahmin priests who earned a living by performing fortune-bringing rituals – that the true spiritual seeker turns away from worldly fortune and pursues the path of *brahmacariya*. References to going 'beyond *puñña* and *pāpa'* in these passages are to *prudential* good and evil, not *moral* good and evil. Nowhere do we see in these passages a suggestion that *arahants* transcend moral norms.

5 Colour-coded Karma

A passage in which the Buddha speaks of 'karma that is neither black nor white' has also given rise to the view that the actions of the awakened are of a morally unique kind. Before considering this passage let us look at another one which mentions a colour-coding system of karma. This first passage will provide us with a context for interpreting the second.

In the Numerical Discourses, Ānanda reports to the Buddha a six-fold classification of individuals declared by a rival teacher, Pūraṇa Kassapa (AN iii.383f:939f). The colours mentioned are black, blue, red, yellow, white, and supreme white. The black class consists of individuals who follow a cruel occupation, and the remaining five are ascetics of various kinds.

The Buddha takes this as his cue to set forth his own six-fold classification, this time based on moral criteria. His classification is based on two social classes, one black and one white. The black class refers to people born into a low family and the white class to people born into a high family. Each class is then subdivided into three identical categories. Individuals through their actions are said to produce a black state of rebirth (*kaṇhaṃ dhammaṃ*), for example, in hell; a white state of rebirth (*sukkaṃ dhammaṃ*), for example, in heaven; or to attain *nibbāna*, which is neither black nor white (*akaṇhaṃ asukkaṃ nibbānaṃ*). This gives a total of six classes of action paralleling the classification of Pūraṇa Kassapa although now with a Buddhist rationale.

In the Buddha's formulation, the black state is said to be the result of misconduct in body, speech, and mind. The white state is produced by good conduct in body, speech, and mind. The state that is neither black nor white is produced by one who shaves off his hair and beard and puts on the ochre robe, in other words, the Buddhist renouncer. Nirvana is described as neither black nor white because it is neither hell (black) nor heaven (white) and is beyond the realm of rebirth. There seems nothing problematic about this format, which parallels the threefold classification of the Mahācattārīsaka Sutta. The three classes of people it describes are those who do evil deeds, those who do good deeds, and those who follow the Eightfold Path and attain release from rebirth.

We now come to the second passage involving colour-coding.[2] This is an often-mentioned passage from the Kukkuravatika Sutta (MN 57). Here we find the Buddha in conversation with Puṇṇa, the 'ox-duty' ascetic. He is so called, the commentary informs us, because he decked himself with horns

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[2]The same Pali terms (*kaṇha/sukka*) are used in each discourse but have been rendered as black/white and bright/dark in the translations quoted.

and a tail and ate grass. Puṇṇa asks the Buddha to teach Dhamma and the Buddha replies as follows:

> Puṇṇa, there are four kinds of action proclaimed by me after realising them for myself with direct knowledge. What are the four? There is dark action with dark result; there is bright action with bright result; there is dark-and-bright action with dark-and-bright result; and there is action that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, action that leads to the destruction of action. (MN i.395f:495)

The four kinds of action referred to in this statement are shown in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1: Four kinds of *kamma* in the Kukkuravatika Sutta (MN 57)

Action	Result	Outcome
1 Dark	Dark	Suffering
2 Bright	Bright	Happiness
3 Dark and Bright	Dark and Bright	Mixed suffering and happiness
4 Neither Dark nor Bright	Destruction of Action	Arahantship via Eightfold Path

This passage has given rise to some ingenious exegesis, but if we consider it in the light of the previous passage the meaning is straightforward. Once again, the significant distinction is twofold: the fourth category (shaded in Table 8.1) refers to actions leading to nirvana while all other actions lead to rebirth. Dark (or black) actions are the result of 'afflictive' (*sabyābajjha*) 'formations' (*saṅkhāra*) of body, speech, and mind, in other words evil acts of the kind leading to rebirth in an 'afflictive' world, such as hell. Bright (or white) actions are the opposite, leading to rebirth in happy circumstances like heaven, and dark-and-bright actions are a mixture of the two. Mixed actions lead to mixed results, such as rebirth in the human world with mixed good and bad fortune. The only difference from the previous passage is that an additional permutation has been included, namely the mixture of bright and dark just mentioned. This gives three classes of action (1-3) all leading to rebirth in *saṃsāra*.

The fourth and last kind of action is described as the intention or resolve (*cetanā*) to renounce the first three. This is said to lead to the 'destruction of action', which is achieved, the commentary understands, by following the four supramundane paths leading to arahantship. Elsewhere, Buddhaghosa

identifies this fourth kind of *kamma* with the seven limbs of enlightenment and the Eightfold Path (Asl 89). Once again, this fourth class of action is soteriologically efficacious because one embarked on the Eightfold Path is committed to the pursuit of moral and epistemic virtue.

But what is the difference between bright actions and neither dark nor bright actions? Are they not in some sense both virtuous? Indeed, but the performance of 'unafflictive' bright actions does not by itself put an end to rebirth. Morally virtuous persons, of whom there are many in the world, can expect a good rebirth as the reward for their piety. Such persons may not have heard the Buddha's teachings and while they practice moral virtue, they lack wisdom. The path to arahantship, however, requires an acceptance of the truth of Buddhist teachings. Such is the point of the distinction between the two forms of right view made in the Great Forty (*Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*) discussed earlier:

> And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold: there is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment; and there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path. (MN iii.72:934-5)

The first kind of right view corresponds to the 'white' class of actions and leads to rebirth. The second kind of right view corresponds to the class of action that is 'neither black nor white' and leads to nirvana. In sum, what the Buddha is saying is that whereas the Eightfold Path leads to nirvana, all other forms of practice lead to rebirth, and some even to hell.

6 *Arahant* Suicide

Suicide is mentioned in various places in the canon, and is strongly disapproved of (Harvey 2000, 287–92). However, there are three cases of suicide that appear to lend support to the belief that the awakened transcend moral norms. What makes these cases special is that the three monks were *arahants* at the time of their demise. The idea that an *arahant* would be capable of 'using the knife', as the sources call it, seems contrary to the way *arahants* are generally depicted in the canon. These three cases are therefore anomalous and somewhat problematic, and the remarks of the commentators suggest they were unsure what to make of them.

The three cases concern the monks Channa, Vakkali, and Godhika. All are suffering and in great distress. Channa is very ill and tells Sāriputta: 'Strong

painful feelings are increasing in me, not subsiding, and their increase, not their subsiding, is to be discerned. I will use the knife, friend Sāriputta, I have no desire to live' (SN iv.57; 1165). Suggesting he is already an *arahant* he adds, 'Remember this, friend Sāriputta: the bhikkhu Channa will use the knife blamelessly.' Channa then kills himself and the Buddha states 'when one lays down this body and takes up another body, then I say one is blameworthy. This did not happen in the case of the bhikkhu Channa.' It is not entirely clear whether in these words the Buddha is condoning Channa's *suicide* or making a general point about the desirability of putting an end to rebirth. In other words, is the Buddha saying that Channa's *suicide* was blameless, or that *attaining the end of rebirth* is blameless?

In the second case, the monk Vakkali is gravely ill, and when asked by the Buddha about his condition replies 'Venerable sir, I am not bearing up, I am not getting better. Strong painful feelings are increasing in me, not subsiding, and their increase, not their subsiding, is to be discerned' (SN iii.120:938). The Buddha then withdraws but sends the following message to Vakkali: 'Do not be afraid, Vakkali, do not be afraid. Your death will not be a bad one. Your demise will not be a bad one' (SN iii.122: 940). Soon afterwards, Vakkali 'used the knife' and committed suicide. After Vakkali's death, the Buddha told the *bhikkhus* that he saw Māra in the form of a cloud of smoke searching for the consciousness of Vakkali without success. The Buddha thereupon declared that Vakkali had attained final nirvana.

The third monk, Godhika, is a diligent practitioner of meditation with a well-concentrated mind. He reports that he had reached 'temporary liberation of mind' on six occasions but each time fell back.[3] Feeling frustrated with this failure to achieve a state of permanent liberation he then makes a seventh attempt as follows:

> A seventh time, while the Venerable Godhika was dwelling diligent, ardent, and resolute, he reached temporary liberation of mind. Then it occurred to the Venerable Godhika: 'six times already I have fallen away from temporary liberation of mind. Let me use the knife.' (SN i.120-1: 213)

Godhika's intention was to kill himself while in the state of liberation before he fell away again. It is not clear how he intended to perform this vio-

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[3] The question whether an *arahant* can fall away from arahantship is discussed in the Kathāvatthu (Kvu 69ff). The orthodox view is that while a *bhikkhu* can reach emancipation intermittently in trance (*jhāna*) and fall away again due to the presence of certain defilements (*kilesas*), an *arahant* never falls away from arahantship once it has been attained.

lent act while in a state of trance, but nevertheless he managed successfully to take his own life. The Buddha refers once again to Māra appearing in a cloud of smoke searching for Godhika's consciousness without success and concludes 'Godhika has attained final Nibbāna.'

> An important question is whether the three monks attained arahantship before or after they 'used the knife.'

What can we conclude about *arahant* ethics from these cases? Allowing that all three monks became *arahants*, an initial question concerns whether they achieved this state before or after they 'used the knife'. The commentators find it hard to accept that an *arahant* would be driven to commit suicide to escape suffering. This would be a form of desire for non-existence (*vibhava-taṇhā*) and *arahants* are supposed to have rooted out all such craving. It is also said to be impossible for an *arahant* to deprive a living thing of life (DN iii.235:495). The commentaries accordingly suggest that the monks attained arahantship only at the moment of their deaths. In other words, their decision to take their lives and their ensuing lethal act of 'using the knife' was made in a disturbed state of mind *prior* to achieving awakening. If this interpretation is correct, there are no conclusions to be drawn about *arahant* ethics from these cases because the suicidal intentions and actions were those of unawakened individuals.

If, on the other hand, the monks attained arahantship *before* committing suicide we would have to seek some explanation for the Buddha's failure to disapprove of their actions. This might be, as some have thought, because *arahants* transcend the rules of ordinary morality. Perhaps so, but there are reasons to be cautious about such a conclusion. For one thing, we would need to explain why any supposed licence to break the precepts applies only in the case of suicide. *Arahants* do not appear to be exempt from other moral rules. On the contrary, they observe the precepts more scrupulously than non-*arahants*.

An alternative explanation is that the Buddha simply felt it would be inappropriate to blame those who take their lives in circumstances of distress. Thus, his failure to censure their actions should not be taken as a tacit approval of suicide, or as evidence that *arahants* transcend moral norms. Instead, it signifies the Buddha's recognition that those in distress are sometimes driven to desperate solutions, and for that reason should not be judged too harshly. However we interpret these cases they remain exceptional and it would be unwise to read too much into them. There is considerable literature available for those who wish to pursue the question further (Keown 1996; Analayo 2010; Analayo 2014; Delhey 2009; Becker 1990; Kitts 2018).

7 Skilful Means

To conclude the chapter, we return briefly to a topic discussed in Chapter 2. We noted that a bodhisattva takes a vow to save all beings, and that in certain circumstances the precepts can present an obstacle to reducing suffering. Telling a lie, for example, is prohibited by the precepts but on some occasions, it can be the compassionate thing to do, for example if it avoids hurting someone's feelings. Telling a white lie is a relatively minor offence, but if the principle is valid there seems no reason it should not also apply to more serious offences. Some Mahāyāna sources go so far as to allow compassion (*karuṇā*) to sanction gravely immoral acts if the bodhisattva sees that so doing would prevent or reduce suffering. In Chapter 2 we noted an example from the Skill-in-Means Sūtra (Upāyakauśalya Sūtra) according to which even killing is justified to prevent someone committing a heinous crime and suffering karmic retribution in hell.

The use of skilful means, however, does not imply that a bodhisattva goes 'beyond good and evil'. In fact, there is usually a recognition that in breaking the precepts the bodhisattva does wrong. This is evident from the fact that there are negative karmic consequences attached to the act performed. The ship's captain in the Skill-in-Means Sūtra, for instance, accepts that killing the assassin will send him to hell for many eons. This negative karmic result clearly implies that killing is immoral and shows that the bodhisattva is still operating within the framework of conventional morality.

Why, then, is the action of taking life commended in this case? The reason is a new moral criterion has been introduced which allows good and bad to be weighed against one another in consequentialist fashion. The factors on the positive side of the balance are the compassion that motivates the act, the good karma from the compassion, and the five hundred lives that are saved. On the negative side, there is a breach of the First Precept, the bad karma of taking life, and the death of the assassin. Some Mahāyāna sources evidently believe there is a formula by which such disparate values can be weighed, and that in this case the balance tips in favour of compassionate action. The doctrine of 'skilful means', accordingly, does not transcend morality so much as redefine it. The ethical issues associated with the use of skilful means are discussed further by Harvey (Harvey 2000, 134–40).

In sum, in this chapter we considered six pieces of evidence that appear to lend support to the view that the awakened transcend moral norms. When correctly interpreted, however, they reveal little support for this claim.

8 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- The Discourse on the Great Forty (MN 117) makes a distinction between worldly and supramundane religious practice in relation to the Eightfold Path. This is sometimes taken to imply that morality is a 'worldly' practice that leads to *puñña* and must be transcended. The correct understanding is that all who follow the Eightfold Path pursue a form of well-being that is *lokuttara*.
- The point of the raft parable is that 'good things' (*dhammā*) should not be misused. It does not mean that the Dhamma and its moral values must be left behind.
- Buddhas and *arahants* demonstrate exemplary moral virtue (*kusala*) and never infringe the precepts.
- Some early sources speak of individuals going 'beyond *puñña* and *pāpa*.' This refers to renunciates who abandon the household life, not to *arahants* passing 'beyond good and evil'. *Puñña* and *papa* in these contexts refers to *prudential* rather than *moral* good.
- References to karma that is 'neither black nor white' do not imply the existence of a special class of volition unique to the awakened. Such karma simply denotes the acts and volitions of those who follow the Eightfold Path.

Discussion Questions

1. What is special about the supramundane (*lokuttara*) path to nirvana. How is it different from the worldly (*lokiya*) path?
2. What is the difference between a) *akiriyavādins,* b) *kiriyavādins,* and c) followers of the Eightfold Path?
3. What is the meaning of the raft parable? Why did the Buddha teach it?
4. Who goes 'beyond *puñña* and *papa*' and by what means?
5. What does the Buddha mean when he describes a certain form of karma as 'neither black nor white'?

Further Reading

- The Alagaddūpamasutta or Discourse on the Parable of the Water Snake (MN 22 paragraphs SC1-SC22)
  https://suttacentral.net/mn22/en/bodhi
- Delhey, M. 'Views on Suicide in Buddhism: Some Remarks.' In *Buddhism and Violence*, edited by M. Zimmerman, 25–63. Lumbini International Research Institute, Reichert Verlag, 2006.
- Keown, D. 'Buddhism and Suicide: The Case of Channa.' *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 8–31.
- *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta or Discourse on the Great Forty (MN 117)
  https://suttacentral.net/mn117/en/bodhi

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9 Eudaimonism

1 In this Chapter

In this chapter and the next we will look at approaches to interpreting Buddhist ethics using Western paradigms. The first adopts a classical perspective, that of Aristotle and his theory of well-being known as 'eudaimonism'. Being *eudaimon* means being blessed with a good or happy life. Eudaimonism is a 'nature-fulfilment' theory because it holds that happiness comes from fulfilling the potential of one's nature. The key ingredient in a happy or fulfilled life, according to Aristotle, is virtue or excellence (*arete*). Virtue is an 'internal' or psychological good, and Aristotle also believed that for a life to be truly happy virtue must be accompanied by an appropriate amount of 'external' goods like health, wealth, and friendship. After reviewing the main features of eudaimonism we consider the similarities and differences between eudaimonia and nirvana in respect of the value each places on internal and external goods.

2 Aristotle

In Chapter 3 we reviewed four theories of well-being. These were mental-state theories, desire-fulfilment theories, objective list theories, and nature-fulfilment theories. The last, as the name implies, holds that the good of a thing is to be found in the fulfilment or perfection of its nature. Goodness thus consists in something being an excellent example of its kind. The good of an apple tree, for instance, is to produce apples. A tree that flourishes and produces abundant fruit has fulfilled its function as an apple tree. A tree blighted by disease, by contrast, will produce little or no fruit and falls short of the state of perfection possible for a thing of its kind.

Aristotle's eudaimonism postulates that like the apple tree human beings have a natural function (*ergon*) and that their final end or purpose (*telos*) lies

in fulfilling this function. A person who fulfils it to a high degree is said to be *eudaimon*, in other words, happy or flourishing. But what is the function of a human being? Aristotle observed that human beings have a capacity which plants and animals lack, namely rationality. He identified this as the most distinctive characteristic of a human being and regarded the perfection of our intellectual nature as a central element in well-being (eudaimonia). Segall describes Aristotle's thinking as follows:

> Aristotle believed that the lives of living beings had a *telos,* or fi-
> nal purpose. Under ideal conditions, they developed in ways that
> allowed them to advance toward fulfillment of their intended
> destiny. It helps me to think of this . . . as an unfolding set of
> developmental potentials that lie initially dormant within an
> organism and that are regulated and guided by an organism's bi-
> ological functioning in interaction with its environment. Acorns
> develop into oak trees, and not into maples. Hatchlings grow
> to build nests and migrate. Human infants learn to walk, speak,
> and form social ties. Since humans are rational animals, they
> aspire to live well and attain happiness, and they do this through
> developing a set of character strengths or virtues that represent
> human excellence and through developing practical reason to
> successfully negotiate life's complexities. (Segall 2020, 34f)

The author quoted above mentions two things that enable human beings 'to live well and attain happiness.' These are 'character strengths' (or moral virtues) and 'practical reason' (the intellectual virtue Aristotle called *phronesis*). We will have more to say about these attributes below. The question we seek an answer to here is whether virtue alone is sufficient for happiness, or whether it must be supplemented by prudential good. We will consider Aristotle's answer to this question as a prologue to addressing the identical question to Buddhism.

Prudential Good in Eudaimonia

Aristotle claimed that virtue is the primary component in well-being or eudaimonia. For him, virtue involves the exercise of the uniquely human capacity of reason in shaping one's life and so is the most valuable of all goods. Its superiority to 'external' goods – things like wealth, friends, and political influence – can be seen from his comment that 'character is a more valuable thing than wealth' (NE 1165b20). Virtue does not arise

spontaneously; it must be learned. People are neither good nor bad by nature, but form their characters using the raw materials nature provides. For example, because they have sense organs human beings can experience sensual pleasure, an ability that is morally neutral. One can, however, choose to experience sensual pleasure in morally appropriate or inappropriate ways, such as in marriage or adultery. The virtues guide us in making the right choice.

As noted in Chapter 3, Aristotle mentions a dozen or so virtues in Book VI of the Nicomachean Ethics. Some of these are moral virtues and some are intellectual virtues. Examples of *moral* virtues in the Aristotelian framework are the primary virtues of courage, justice, and temperance. Virtues of this kind regulate the appetites and passions. *Intellectual* virtue takes two forms. The first is epistemic virtue (*sophia*), or the ability to think well, particularly about universal or necessary truths. In a Buddhist context this would mean truths about matters such as suffering, impermanence, no-self, and dependent origination (*paṭicca-sammuppāda*).

The second form of intellectual virtue is practical wisdom (*phronesis*). This is the virtue of being good at thinking about practical matters and choosing wise means to good ends. Practical wisdom allows us to navigate our way through the complexities of life and reach our goals by honourable means. It may be thought of as the hub to which the individual moral virtues are attached like spokes. Buddhist sources do not seem to have a name for practical wisdom: the common translation of *paññā* as 'wisdom' disguises this fact, but *paññā* is an epistemic rather than a practical virtue. The relationship between the components of eudaimonia just discussed are shown in the accompanying diagram.

Most commentators believe that Aristotle understands eudaimonia as a composite of moral and prudential good as shown in Figure 9.1. On this view, external goods are seen not only as supporting virtuous action but as themselves a component of eudaimonia. Such goods increase eudaimonia, and eudaimonia is reduced if they are taken away. Aristotle describes external goods metaphorically as a form of embellishment, in the way fine clothing or jewellery enhance the beauty of their wearer. Possession of such goods, in Aristotle's words, make the life of the virtuous person 'better, more attractive, more pleasant as befits a person of excellent character' (NE 1100b22-23). On this understanding, virtue, as the primary or central component in happiness, directs the pursuit and use of external goods which then themselves contribute to the happiness of the agent. Of course, without virtue no quantity of prudential good can help an agent realise happiness.

Figure 9.1: The components of eudaimonia in Aristotle
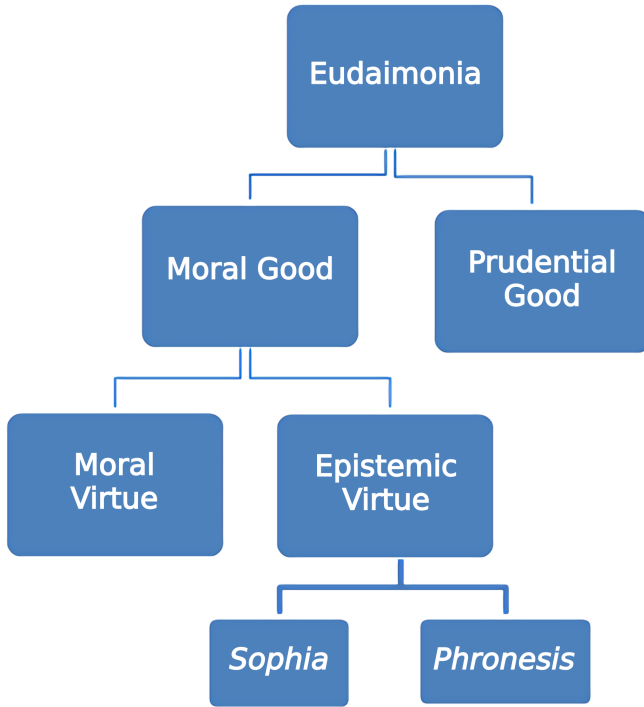
The Stoics disagreed with Aristotle's view and taught that virtue alone was sufficient for eudaimonia.

Aristotle described the person who is *eudaimon* as 'one whose activities accord with complete virtue, *with an adequate supply of external goods*, not for just any time but for a complete life' (NE 1101a14-16, emphasis added). Aristotle also points out:

> There are some things the lack of which takes the lustre from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty; for the man who is very ugly in appearance or ill-born or solitary and child-less is not very likely to be happy, and perhaps a man would be still less likely if he had thoroughly bad children or friends or had lost good children or friends by death. As we said, then, happiness seems to need this sort of prosperity in addition. (NE 1099b4-10)

Aristotle's position on eudaimonia can be contrasted with that of Stoics, whom we mentioned in Chapter 3. The Stoics, and particularly the later members of this school, denied that external goods contribute to eudaimonia. As T.D. Roche notes, 'The Stoics notoriously claimed that living in accordance with virtue was sufficient for eudaimonia. As long as an agent retains virtue, she cannot be dislodged from happiness' (Roche 2014, 37). This was thought to hold true even in the case of great misfortune, poverty, sickness, and the death of family and friends. Roche comments, 'The Stoics go so far as to deny that the things Aristotle calls "external goods" are really ever goods at all, reserving that expression for what they take to be the conditions that constitute eudaimonia, namely, the virtues' (Roche 2014, 37). The Stoics had a low regard for prudential goods, regarding them as 'preferred indifferents' (things it was better to have than lack but which in themselves added nothing to happiness). Brennan elaborates as follows:

> Virtue, say the Stoics, is the finest of all things, outshining pleasure, wealth, and even life itself, as much as the sun outshines a candle. Indeed, it is the only good thing, and all of the things that we mistakenly value and pursue are merely indifferents, with no tendency to bring us happiness. Virtue is necessary for our happiness, and sufficient for our happiness, and indeed the sole component and contributor to our happiness. Whoever has virtue is perfectly happy, and indeed no less happy than Zeus himself. (Brennan 2015, 31)

In Chapter 3 we characterised Aristotle as an exponent of 'virtue ethics'. This term has a variety of meanings, but on a narrow interpretation it is the view that virtue is the fundamental ethical concept, as it was for the Stoics. Strictly speaking, this is not Aristotle's position because what is fundamental for Aristotle is not virtue but eudaimonia, which, as we have seen, is not reducible to virtue alone. For this reason, it is more accurate to qualify Aristotle's position as '*eudaimonistic* virtue ethics.'

This overview of Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia provides a template we can use to compare his conception of well-being with that of Buddhism. We may note that Saddhatissa favoured the Stoic position and believed that Buddhism – and Indian thought in general – rejected the idea that external goods were required for happiness. He saw this as:

> ... another basic difference between the line of Indian thought and that of the later Greek ethics from Aristotle onwards, for

where the *Nicomachean Ethics* allows external goods to be necessary in the practical life of combining prudence and moral virtue as instruments of moral action, and in the highest life of the intellect as a means of physical subsistence, Indian thought offered nothing so accommodating. (Saddhatissa 1987, 22)

3 The Value of Prudential Good

There are many Stoic-sounding passages in Buddhist sources that apparently call for Buddhists to reject worldly goods and devote themselves to a life of austerity. An example are the following verses on the 'eight worldly conditions':

> Gain and loss, disrepute and fame,
> > blame and praise, pleasure and pain:
> > these conditions that people meet
> > are impermanent, transient, and subject to change.
>
> A wise and mindful person knows them
> > and sees that they are subject to change.
> > Desirable conditions don't excite his mind
> > nor is he repelled by undesirable conditions (AN iv.157:1116).

Further evidence of an ascetic tendency can be seen in Devadatta's attempt to make the monastic life more austere through the compulsory practice of the *dhutaṅgas* (Vin iii.171f). The attempt to introduce a vegetarian diet is also evidence of the same trend (MN 55). The call to adopt a 'middle way', however, followed the Buddha's realization that the rejection of prudential goods epitomized in the life of self-denial and mortification was 'a blistering way of practice' (*nijjhāmā paṭipadā*) (AN i.295:372), and as prejudicial to well-being as the over-valuation of the same goods.

Perhaps what we should understand from the principle of the 'middle way,' therefore, is not that prudential goods should be rejected in their entirety either by the householder or the renunciate, but that prudence must be exercised with respect to them. As the Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood (MN 29) makes clear, one should avoid becoming 'intoxicated' (*majjati*) with goods of any kind, whether moral or prudential. It is to avoid this danger that an attitude of Stoic-like impassivity towards worldly goods is often commended.

What these Stoic-like passages are claiming is not that prudential good is valueless but that it is ignoble (unbecoming to the *ariya*) to seek worldly

prosperity apart from virtue. This is archetypically the way of Māra, who seeks power over the realm of sense-desire rather than aiming to transcend it through virtue (Harvey 2019, 21). Accordingly, we should not seek prudential good exclusively or as a primary objective. We should pursue prudential goods, such as our own satisfaction and contentment, only insofar as they are compatible with virtue.

> What we should understand from the principle of the 'middle way' is not that prudential goods should be rejected in their entirety either by the householder or the renouncer, but that prudence must be exercised with respect to them.

There is a further similarity we can notice between Aristotle's position and that of Buddhism. For Aristotle, prudential good enhances happiness only when the agent is virtuous. As Roche notes: 'an external good, for Aristotle, can directly promote a person's happiness only if that person is a virtuous person and therefore pursues and uses external goods in an excellent manner' (Roche 2014, 40). This is because, in Aristotle's opinion, prudential goods are only good in a provisional or non-ultimate sense and become ennobled when used as instruments of virtuous action (EE 1248b27-34). External goods are, as Anthony Kenny puts it, 'the field of operation of the moral virtues' (Kenny 1996, 22), and discretion and judgement must be exercised with respect to them. Goods like wealth and political power are beneficial and noble (*kalon*) in the hands of the good man (the *kalos kagathos*), but not in the hands of the immoral person who will abuse them. They enhance the well-being of the former, but not of the latter because the former knows the proper measure with respect to them.

> The value of external goods in both Buddhism and Aristotle is dependent on how they are produced and consumed.

In a similar way we observed earlier that Buddhist sources take an ambivalent attitude towards prudential goods and represent them as something of a double-edged sword. Wealth, for example, can be righteously earned and spent, but it can also be a magnet that draws the renunciate back to the world. Pleasure can be both wholesome and a snare. Political power and authority are used benevolently by the *Cakkavatti* but misused by the tyrant. Friends can be good or bad, leading one another into virtue or vice. A noble

birth offers great opportunity, but can also produce children who, like the young Buddha, are 'extremely delicately nurtured' (*accanta sukhumāla*) (AN i.145:239) and shielded from the realities of life.

Because of this ambivalence, warnings are routinely issued that external goods can become a danger (*ādīnava*) in the hands of an agent who lacks virtue. Take the case of fame. The Buddha points out that a monk who 'lauds himself and disparages others because of his renown' thinking, 'I am well known and famous; but these other bhikkhus are unknown and of no account' is 'an untrue man' (*asappurisa*) (MN iii.40:910). Here, fame is abused, and adds nothing to happiness. Contrast this with the position of the virtuous person, who 'sees the danger' (*bhayadassāvī*) in prudential goods like fame. As is said of the Tathāgata: 'This venerable one has acquired renown and attained fame, but the dangers [connected with renown and fame] are not found in him' (MN i.319:416). We also read 'The gifts given to the Lord are well-bestowed, his fame is well established . . . yet the Lord takes his food-offering without conceit' (DN ii.223:302). In the hands of a virtuous person, therefore, fame enhances rather than detracts from happiness. This seems to confirm that the value of prudential goods is not intrinsic but modulated by virtue.

In sum, the value of external goods in both Buddhism and Aristotle is dependent on the matrix of conditions governing their production and use. Such conditions include the way they are pursued, the moral character of the one who acquires them, and the nature of any end to which they are put. We might say that external goods enhance happiness in proportion to the goodness of their production, ownership, and use.

4 Eudaimonism

If the similarities described above between Buddhism and Aristotle are persuasive, there seem to be grounds to classify Buddhism as a form of eudaimonism. As we noted in Chapter 3, Aristotle says that eudaimonia means 'living well or doing well' (NE 1095a19). Rather than describing pleasant sensations, moods, or emotions, eudaimonia is an evaluative term that characterizes the overall state of a life. The life of eudaimonia is the best possible life, the one that fulfils our deepest wants and needs. The person who achieves this state has everything he or she needs to be happy and fulfilled.

The central recommendation of eudaimonistic virtue ethics might be summed up as 'live so as to realize eudaimonia in one's life'. Buddhism,

it seems, makes a parallel recommendation to 'live so as to realize nirvana in one's life.' Eudaimonia and nirvana, as Segall notes, 'Both represent the ideal of the best possible kind of life one can aspire to within their respective cultures' (Segall 2020, 63). Winston King describes the goal of Buddhism as 'the development of those capacities inherent in human nature to their absolute maximum. Every man is a potential saint; Buddhahood is Perfect Manhood' (King 2001, 6).

The basic claim of eudaimonism is that the morally good person is a happy person. Saddhatissa comments 'Aristotle maintained throughout the fundamental doctrine of Socrates and Plato that "Virtue is Happiness", a doctrine with which Buddhist thought would, in general, be in agreement' (Saddhatissa 1987, 10). Most eudaimonists believe that the virtues, as character traits, play a key role in happiness due to the way they shape and determine lives. Living is understood as a project, and it is a project we can undertake well or badly. This is where a Perfectionist aspect comes on the scene because we perfect ourselves by choosing good ends and pursuing them well. Eudaimonia provides the standard by which this project of self-perfection is judged. In this respect eudaimonism is intrinsically normative, and the standard for living well or badly is happiness (eudaimonia) in the objective sense described above.

Excellence or Welfare

There are two ways of thinking about eudaimonia, depending on whether we conceive it as directed primarily to moral perfection or welfare. We could express this in the form of a question: is eudaimonia primarily about being good, or being happy? And if it is primarily one, does this exclude the other? This is a dichotomy we are familiar with by now. Since the alternatives conceive of eudaimonia in terms of either excellence or welfare, they are referred to as 'excellence-prior' and 'welfare-prior' conceptions (Baril 2013). The relevance of this question for Buddhism comes down to the following: should we think of nirvana in 'excellence-prior' or 'welfare-prior' terms? As the nomenclature suggests, the former would see nirvana as primarily a state of virtue, excellence, or perfection, while the latter would see it as primarily a state of welfare.

> Is nirvana to be defined as the end of suffering, or as the end of greed, hatred and delusion? The former yields a 'welfare-prior' understanding of nirvana and the latter an 'excellence-prior' understanding.

We have noted on several occasions that nirvana seems to straddle two dimensions of well-being: the good as virtue (*kusala*) and the good as welfare (*puñña*). In our earlier discussion of nirvanic well-being in Chapter 6 we reviewed these different conceptions. On the one hand nirvana can be characterised in terms of prudential good as felicity or welfare, in other words, as a condition that is good *for* the one who attains it (good in the sense of contributing to personal welfare or worldly happiness). Here, as a state of comfort, it can be compared to other 'felicities' (like a heavenly rebirth) and on this scale of values clearly outshines the rest, like the brightest star. We have seen that prudential good has a close association with nirvanic happiness, even to the point of being identified with it by the 'lay' tradition. On the other hand, nirvana is valued not for the comfort it provides but for its moral excellence. We might say that in this respect it is seen as *good* for the one who attains it (intrinsically good and morally perfective).

In Buddhist terms, the question that confronts us is whether nirvana is to be defined as the end of suffering, or as the end of greed, hatred, and delusion. Perhaps it includes both, but both cannot be foundational. In the formulation of the Four Noble Truths the goal is characterised as the end of suffering (*nirodha*), suggesting that nirvana embodies a significant welfare component. At the same time, the only path to the goal – the Eightfold Path – is a path of virtue. Both moral virtue (*sīla*) and epistemic virtue (*paññā*) are central planks in this path. The imagery of path and goal (the path of virtue leading to a state of welfare) at first suggests an instrumental relationship such that nirvana is the end of suffering and virtue is the means to this end. This would instrumentalize virtue, representing it as a 'skill' deployed in the service of welfare and yielding a 'welfare prior' understanding of nirvana. We suggested in Chapter 7, however, that *kusala* is not appropriately translated or represented as a skill. Perhaps, then, it is virtue that is foundational, and welfare is a property of virtue in the way that heat is a property of fire. This differs from the way the goal of Buddhism is normally depicted because it prioritises excellence over the elimination of suffering.

The Noble

This alternative perspective is consistent with Aristotle's claim that the virtuous person is motivated not primarily by welfare but by what is 'fine' or 'noble' (*to kalon*). We encounter a similar notion in Buddhism, in terms of which the virtuous person seeks to emulate the conduct of the 'noble ones' (*ariya*).

> Aristotle suggests that the virtuous person is inspired by the standard of 'the noble' (*to kalon*). Similarly, in Buddhism, the highest standard of conduct is exhibited by the 'noble ones' (*ariya*).

The classic example of the term *ariya* is in the Four Noble Truths (*ariya-sacca*) and the Noble Eightfold Path (*ariya-aṭṭhangika-magga*), but the concept of the noble permeates the axiology of the Pali canon.[1] *Arahants* are described as 'noble ones' (*ariya*) (Dhp 164) and the stream-winner is said to possess 'the morality dear to the noble ones' (*ariyakanta-sīla*). We hear of 'noble persons' (*ariya-puggala*) and the 'noble order' (*ariya-saṅgha*). In the Ariyapariyesanā Sutta the Buddha speaks of the 'noble' (*ariya*) and the 'ignoble' (*anariya*) searches. The *PTS Dictionary* gives as its third meaning of *Ariya*: '(*ethical*) in accord with the customs and ideals of the Aryan clans, held in esteem by Aryans, generally approved. Hence: right, good, ideal'. The Noble Eightfold Path, then, ought to be followed because it is right, good, and ideal. The noble person follows this path because it is the right thing to do, and only secondarily because it furthers her interest by reducing suffering. Thus, while welfare is not ignored, excellence is the star she steers by.

> Living excellently or 'nobly' and living happily are part of a single package. Welfare, in other words, is a minor but important part of our happiness.

An understanding of eudaimonia (or nirvana) in excellence-prior terms does not mean that welfare is disregarded, or that people are discouraged from seeking it. As Christopher Toner puts it, 'it just means that this recommendation is to be located downstream of, and informed by, the central recommendation of striving to live the best, most choiceworthy life' (Toner 2015, 354). It often turns out that by pursuing excellence the virtuous person also obtains prudential goods. For example, an athlete who strives for excellence in sport may also obtain medals, fortune, and fame. The virtuous person will celebrate such 'external' goods with feelings of pleasure and pride grounded in a genuine sense of self-worth. As we saw in Chapter 5,

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[1] Rupert Gethin notes: 'In the first place the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* subsumes all other spiritual practice; it is, as it were, the whole of the spiritual life. Secondly, as complete and perfect spiritual practice, it is the ultimate form of spiritual practice; it is what the *bhikkhu* aspires to; it is the goal, the end, the culmination of the spiritual quest.' (Gethin 1992, 207)

worldly goods are not unimportant, and as far as the pursuit of welfare goes we might adopt a general principle along the lines of 'Human beings should seek what is good for them (their welfare), in whatever ways are consistent with the requirements of virtue' (Toner 2015, 355). Understood in this way, welfare is a secondary but important constituent of happiness.

Above, reference was made to the 'noble' and 'ignoble' searches. The object of these two forms of search are respectively nirvana, and things that are subject to birth, old age, sickness, and death, in other words, things afflicted by *dukkha* as defined in the First Noble Truth. The *sutta* gives examples of such things as follows:

> Wife and children are subject to birth, men and women slaves, goats and sheep, fowl and pigs, elephants, cattle, horses, and mares, gold and silver are subject to birth. These objects of attachment are subject to birth; and one who is tied to these things, infatuated with them, and utterly committed to them, being himself subject to birth, seeks what is also subject to birth. (MN i.162:254)

The things listed here are all prudential goods, and at first sight it seems the *sutta* is suggesting that prudential good should be abandoned. What it points out, however, is that it is the one who is 'tied to', 'infatuated with', and 'utterly committed' to these things, that will be reborn. It does not claim that prudential good is inherently incompatible with nirvana, only that we should not 'search' for these things as ends in themselves. The noble quest is for nirvana, not for worldly goods.

We can see that virtue is prior to welfare from the fact that should a choice need to be made it will be welfare that is sacrificed. Examples of the prioritization of the ethical over the prudential can be seen in many places in Buddhist literature. We see it, for example, in the graphic imagery of the Simile of the Saw. Here, the Buddha says: 'Bhikkhus, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching' (MN i.129:223). It appears from this that generating thoughts of hatred is a greater evil than the suffering involved in bodily dismemberment.

Another example where virtue is prioritized over prudential good is in the Puṇṇovāda sutta (MN 145), where the Buddha and the monk Puṇṇa are discussing the latter's plans to go as a missionary to a remote region where the people are 'fierce and rough'. Asked by the Buddha how he would respond to abuse and violence, Puṇṇa responds that he would regard

the local people as kind because they did not treat him more harshly. A similar example is the Jātaka story of Khantivādin, 'the preacher of patience' (Jātaka 313) who refrains from anger despite being violently abused. The protagonists in these examples all prioritized what was *good* (virtue) over what was good *for them* (avoiding suffering). In their view, failing in virtue (*kusala*) is worse than the loss of welfare experienced in suffering.

5 Dissimilarities

Above we outlined some similarities between Aristotle's conception of well-being as eudaimonia and the Buddhist conception of well-being as nirvana. It has been suggested that both prioritise virtue but recognise a role for prudential good. However, there are also differences between these conceptions of well-being.

One difference is that the virtues recognized in Buddhism are different to those commended by Aristotle. This does not mean, of course, that they cannot belong to the same family of ethical theory, namely eudaimonistic virtue ethics. Members of this family (in which many scholars include Confucianism and the Stoics) will differ in certain respects and may endorse different virtues in line with their different conceptions of the human *telos*. The virtues required by an Athenian gentleman in fulfilling his civic duties, for instance, may not be appropriate for an itinerant *samaṇa* in north-east India, or a Confucian sage concerned to uphold ritual propriety (*li*). Nevertheless, there is an underlying similarity in the notion that human beings have a specific end or purpose – a *telos*. The nature of this end may be defined in different ways and reflect nuanced conceptions of well-being. In each case, however, the state of well-being will be attained gradually through the cultivation of virtuous habits.

> Unlike nirvana, eudaimonia admits of degrees and is not a state of final or perfect happiness.

A second difference is that eudaimonia admits of degrees and is not a state of final or perfect happiness. Indeed, there is no suggestion that human beings can ever be perfectly happy. Eudaimonism recognises, like Buddhism, that the path and the goal are the same and that a person's happiness at any given time is a function of her progress on the path. Eudaimonism does not accept, however, that the path has a definite endpoint and believes a person's eudaimonia can fluctuate over a lifetime. On this view no human being is ever perfectly wise or perfectly virtuous: there is always room

for improvement. We will consider an alternative conception of nirvana known as 'eudaimonic enlightenment' that is closer to Aristotle's idea of eudaimonia when we consider Buddhist modernism in Chapter 11.

6 Selfishness

Since virtuous action can directly enhance only the agent's own happiness a familiar criticism of eudaimonism is that it is egotistic (Hurka 2013; Sumner 1999). Defenders of eudaimonism reject the charge of selfishness (e.g. Annas 2008), suggesting, as noted above, that the agent's search for eudaimonia is motived more by a quest for excellence than a desire for personal welfare. Toner, for example, suggests that the most basic specification of eudaimonia involves not personal welfare so much as 'relating rightly to the good' (Toner 2015). If the good is conceived of as communal, furthermore, it will include others in its scope. Thus, 'Given that there are things (and people) of value other than ourselves, part of what it is for us to flourish ... is to value them for their own sake' (Toner 2015, 351).

The virtue of courage, for example, may lead someone to sacrifice her life in defence of others. Here, one's own well-being – understood as the pursuit of excellence – requires that one do the honourable or noble thing, rather than the selfish thing. If we translate this into a Buddhist context, it means that the virtuous agent should always seek to stand in the right relation to nirvanic goodness. In other words, as King puts it, he might ask 'with regard to any action, state of mind, or attitude: Does it partake of the intrinsic nature of Nibbāna?' (King 2001, 74). Another way of expressing this is to ask: Is this something the Buddha would do?

Since eudaimonia is attained through other-regarding virtues (like generosity) and other-respecting practices (like keeping the precepts) it seems open to recognizing claims of the world beyond the self. The virtuous agent can understand her perfection as involving a direct regard for others for their own sakes, and her virtuous activity will involve her acting in other-regarding ways. She may contribute indirectly to the *virtue* of others by teaching and good example, and directly to the *welfare* of others as the object of her virtuous practice, as in the case of generosity. The virtue of justice also bears directly on the welfare of others by ensuring we give them their due and respect their rights.

> Eudaimonism is not inherently egotistic because the virtuous agent can understand her perfection as involving a direct regard for others for their own sakes, and her virtuous activity will often involve her acting in other-regarding ways.

In Chapter 3 we discussed Perfectionism and distinguished agent-relative and agent-neutral forms. Aristotle's eudaimonism is clearly agent-relative (we will discuss an agent-neutral conception of well-being in the next chapter). Agent-relative Perfectionism recommends to each agent that he or she pursue his or her own perfection. It follows from the excellence-prior characterisation of eudaimonia described above that the search for nirvana is also an agent-relative quest. This is not selfishness, the eudaimonist claims, simply a consequence of the role virtue plays in happiness. If happiness is not a commodity we (skilfully) manufacture but the very way we live our lives, as virtue-based eudaimonism claims, then happiness (eudaimonia) is not something that can be shared. The only life I can live well is my own.

> Forms of agent-relative Perfectionism like Aristotle's eudaimonism recommend to each agent that he or she pursue, as a primary and overriding goal, his or her own perfection.

The Mahāyāna Critique of Hīnayāna

There are implications here for the Mahāyāna critique of Hīnayāna Buddhism as 'egotistical' or 'selfish.' This charge would have force if we understood the *arahant* as pursuing his own *welfare*, but not if we understand the *arahant* as pursuing what is *excellent*. In pursuing virtue, of course, the *arahant* is inevitably pursuing an excellence that is personal. An athlete can only train herself: her excellence in the 100 metres cannot be shared with another athlete. In the same way, virtue cannot be generated in other people. Other beings are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with goodness as Mahāyāna sources sometimes assume. The goal of the Mahāyāna according to many texts is to save all beings from suffering, which means its concept of well-being is agent-neutral and welfare-prior. According to eudaimonist virtue ethics, by contrast, happiness means living well, and no-one – not even the greatest bodhisattva – can live well for someone else.

Early sources favour the idea that one must first seek to perfect *oneself*. The Dhammapada states 'One should first establish oneself in what is proper,

then one should advise another' (Dhp 158). It reinforces the point in two later verses:

> By the self alone is evil done; by the self is one defiled. By the self is evil not done; by the self alone one is purified. Purity and impurity concern the individual. One man may not purify another. One should never give up one's own interests for another's interests, even if great. Knowing one's own interests, one should be intent upon one's own interests. (Dhp 165-166)

The point is repeated in many places (SN v.169: 1648; MN i.46: 130). Such advice sounds less egotistic if we take it as commending the pursuit of excellence, which is by nature personal. At the same time, the pursuit of excellence need not be a solitary project. Necessarily, it is done by a particular person, but need not be exclusively *for* that person. Many activities will involve collaboration and teamwork, and we can collaborate with others in friendship as we pursue our mutual interests as part of the project of living well that we both value. In this way eudaimonia grounds our social collaboration through the recognition that our lives and well-being are enmeshed. At the same time, we can note that Aristotle took a somewhat parochial view of relationships and conceived the scope of virtuous action as limited to the polis. The Stoics, by contrast, were more cosmopolitan and believed that virtuous action should be directed to the whole of humanity. In this respect Buddhism would be closer to the Stoic position.

7 Summary

To recap, it has been suggested that the Buddhist understanding of nirvana resembles Aristotle's understanding of eudaimonia in embracing both moral and prudential good. On this view, prudential good is an integral component in the state of supreme happiness (nirvana). However, prudential good is not the primary component: it is virtue that is foundational. On this understanding, the primary goal of Buddhism is not ending suffering but perfecting virtue. The ending of suffering is a side-effect of achieving the primary goal. In this way, moral good is prior to – or 'upstream' from — prudential good. This conception of nirvanic well-being is inclusivist, excellence-prior and agent-relative.

A simple way of formulating the question posed in this chapter is to ask whether the Buddhist position on happiness corresponds most closely to that of Aristotle or the Stoics. It has been suggested that the Buddhist position

is closer to that of Aristotle. On this view the virtues are necessary but not sufficient for happiness: while there can be no happiness without virtue, a flourishing life is one enriched by prudential goods like health, beauty, reputation, and friendship.

8 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Eudaimonism is the view that well-being is the fundamental ethical value. Since Aristotle prioritises the role of virtue we can classify his position as 'eudaimonistic virtue ethics'.
- Eudaimonism is a form of 'nature fulfilment' theory because it holds that well-being comes about through the fulfilment of natural tendencies or capacities.
- There is disagreement about the role of 'external' goods in eudaimonia. Aristotle believed that external goods are necessary for happiness, but the Stoics thought virtue alone was sufficient.
- We see a similar ambivalence in Buddhism concerning external goods. An ascetic extreme that seeks to exclude them is moderated by the concept of the 'middle way.'
- Buddhism, like Aristotle, believes that external goods contribute to happiness only when they are obtained and used in a virtuous manner.
- Two interpretations of eudaimonia are 'excellence-prior' and 'welfare-prior'. The former understands eudaimonia primarily as a form of excellence, and the latter understands it primarily as welfare.
- There are differences between eudaimonia and nirvana in respect of the specific virtues required for each. Also, unlike nirvana, eudaimonia is never final and complete.
- A common criticism of eudaimonia is that it is egotistic. Defenders respond that the pursuit of excellence is not selfish and need not exclude concern for others.

Discussion Questions

1. What does eudaimonia consist of, according to Aristotle? Are you convinced by his answer?
2. What are 'external' goods, and how important are they to a happy life?
3. Why is Eudaimonism classified as a 'nature fulfilment' theory of well-being?
4. Is it selfish to pursue excellence?
5. If nirvana means living a virtuous life, how can a bodhisattva save other beings?
6. What dissimilarities are there between eudaimonism and Buddhism?

Further Reading

- *Edelglass, William 'Buddhist Ethics and Western Moral Philosophy.' In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, 476–90. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.
- Gowans, Christopher W. *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2015. Ch.6: 138–146.
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10 Consequentialism

1 In this Chapter

In the discussion of Buddhist moral philosophy in Chapter 3 we identi-
fied Consequentialism as a plausible interpretation of Buddhist ethics.
The term 'Consequentialism' dates from the 1950s and supersedes the
older term 'Utilitarianism.' Consequentialism today comes in many
versions. We begin this chapter with a closer look at Consequentialism
and its main variants, such as 'act' and 'rule' consequentialism. Fol-
lowing this, we consider two recent attempts by scholars to interpret
Buddhist ethics using a consequentialist model. The first, known as the
'Nirodha view', argues for a welfarist understanding of well-being as
the elimination of suffering (*dukkha*). The second proposes an 'objec-
tive list' interpretation which understands well-being as consisting of
virtue and 'worldly happiness.'

Consequentialism is a generic name for theories of ethics that hold that the
morality of acts is to be assessed solely by reference to their consequences.
The term dates from the 1950s and supersedes the use of the older term
'Utilitarianism' which refers to the classical formulation of the doctrine by
Bentham and Mill in the nineteenth century. Consequentialism has evolved
into a complex family of theories which evaluate consequences in different
ways and from different perspectives.

In our overview of ethical theories in Chapter 3 we pointed out that
consequentialist theories are forward-looking in contrast to deontological
theories that judge the rightness of actions on the basis of a pre-existing
principle or obligation. For example, a promise made in the past to repay a
loan becomes, for a deontologist, the key determinant of the debtor's conduct.
He should unhesitatingly repay the loan without considering more beneficial
uses to which the money might be put. Consequentialism looks at the matter
through the other end of the telescope with an eye to the future rather than

the past. It denies that pre-existing duties have a bearing on what make an act right. All that matters, it believes, are the consequences of what the agent does now.

What makes one course of action better than another for a consequentialist? This depends purely on results. How the results are weighted and compared depends in turn on the criterion of the good to be applied. One common criterion is pleasure. This was the value or 'utility' adopted by the classical Utilitarians, as we discussed in Chapter 3. Their theory is known as *hedonistic* utilitarianism because of its claim that pleasure is the only intrinsic good and pain the only intrinsic evil. Thus, if the agent in our example thinks more pleasure will be produced (or more pain avoided) by repaying the debt he should do so, otherwise not.

Like most theories of ethics consequentialism provides a theory of the right and a theory of the good. The theory of the right is that the right act is the one that maximises the good. The theory of the good in this example is that the good consists of pleasure. Earlier, we reviewed four theories of well-being. The theory applicable to this example would be a mental-state theory that identifies well-being with pleasant states of mind.

Forms of Consequentialism

Consequentialism is the simplest of the theories of ethics we have considered (at least at first sight) and its clarity accounts for much of its appeal. Difficulties soon arise however, both in respect of its evaluative and normative aspects. As regards the former, critics have questioned whether well-being can convincingly be reduced to a single value like pleasure. The classical Utilitarians were mocked for portraying human beings as little more than pigs in the farmyard seeking to satisfy their animal lusts. Mill responded to this charge by distinguishing between 'higher' and 'lower' pleasures, and over time more sophisticated theories of well-being have been developed.

> Consequentialist theories provide a theory of the good and a theory of the right. A **theory of the good** is evaluative (it tells us what has value, e.g. pleasure). A **theory of the right** is normative (it tells us what actions to perform, in this case, actions that maximise the good).

One of the most popular theories identifies well-being not with a monolithic value like pleasure but with the satisfaction of individual preferences,

whatever they may be. This variant of the doctrine, known as 'preference utilitarianism,' belongs to the family of 'desire-satisfaction' theories of well-being. Some forms of this variant emphasise the material or economic aspects of well-being and are consequently referred to as 'welfarism'. Others take non-material dimensions of well-being– such as knowledge, achievement, and aesthetic values – into account. The inclusion of such non-material values can bring consequentialism into the neighbourhood of virtue ethics and Perfectionism. For example, a theory might claim that the good to be maximized was virtue, in which case we would have a theory that might be termed 'character consequentialism'. Another pluralist conception of well-being is the 'objective list' formulation which defines well-being by reference to a list of values. Pleasure could be one of these, and virtue another. We will consider an interpretation of Buddhist ethics along these lines shortly. Consequentialism, in sum, is compatible with different theories of well-being.

While consequentialist theories can differ in their axiology, or theory of value, they share a common normative principle of maximization. Thus, however they define well-being, they claim the right thing to do is increase it. Here again, however, we soon run into disagreements as to how this works in practice. One question is whether it is *actual* or *expected* consequences that are to be assessed. The early Utilitarians assumed that only actual consequences should be counted. It soon became clear, however, that it would be impossible to take all the consequences of an action into account. The effects of actions spread out like ripples in a pond and often have remote consequences no-one can foresee.

Contemporary consequentialists therefore accept there are epistemological limits to predicting the results of an action. Recognizing that our foresight is limited, they believe we should either count only *proximate* consequences, or those the agent *intends*, regardless of the actual outcome. Others believe that consequentialism should abandon any claim to provide a 'decision procedure' that can systematically identify the right course of action. This frees it from many theoretical objections, such as how future consequences can be known and weighed against one another, but at the price of reducing its value in practical decision-making.

> **Agent-relative** consequentialism says we should prioritise the specific situation of the agent when evaluating likely consequences. **Agent-neutral** consequentialism says we should ignore any personal interests or relationships.

Another consideration is whether we should adopt an agent-relative or agent-neutral perspective. Agent-neutral theories, as mentioned in Chapter 3, assess the consequences of actions in an impersonal and universal way whereas agent-relative theories attach importance to the agent and those around her. For example, an agent-relative theory would place particular weight on how an action affects *my* children rather than *all* children. This satisfies the common intuition that we have a greater obligation to our immediate family and friends than to humanity at large.

Act and Rule Consequentialism

A further distinction is between act and rule consequentialism. The distinction here is practical and strategic. Should consequentialists make decisions on a one-off basis (act-consequentialism) or by following general rules (rule-consequentialism)? Act-consequentialism is the more basic, and requires that every time we act, we should consider whether some alternative act might produce better results. Often, we make decisions unreflectively, but more complex situations may require a considerable amount of deliberation. Rather than go through a process of analysis and calculation on each occasion it is often easier to follow a rule.

> **Act-consequentialism** says we should review the consequences of our acts on a case-by-case basis. **Rule-consequentialism** says that when deciding what to do we should follow a general rule.

Codes of conduct like the Ten Commandments of Christianity have been interpreted as forms of rule-consequentialism, and Charles Goodman has suggested that Theravāda Buddhism implicitly adopts a form of rule-consequentialism. Thus, he suggests the Five Precepts are followed because Buddhists believe they produce the best consequences overall. Goodman sees an evolutionary development in Buddhism whereby consequentialist principles come increasingly to the fore. From an initial position of rule-consequentialism in Theravāda Buddhism, he sees a movement towards act-consequentialism in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As we have seen, some Mahāyāna sources suggest that bodhisattvas can break the rules in specific circumstances because the consequences would be better. Mahāyāna authors like Asaṅga and Śāntideva seem to endorse this position. These authors appear to advocate a form of agent-neutral or universalist consequentialism that prioritises the welfare of all sentient beings over keeping the precepts.

> Mahāyāna authors like Asaṅga and Śāntideva appear to advocate a form of agent-neutral or universalist consequentialism that aims at the welfare of all sentient beings.

Common Features

Consequentialism shares several features with Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular. First is the idea of universality, in other words, the principle that we should seek the well-being of all. A second common feature is maximization. This requires that we should always seek to do as much good as possible. A third similarity concerns the doctrine of karma. Karma teaches that morally good actions will have good prudential consequences and morally bad actions will do the opposite. Thus, at first sight karma seems to operate in accordance with consequentialist principles.

When we consider the matter more closely, however, this last resemblance is less clear. In Chapter 1 we mentioned the dilemma in the *Euthyphro* as to whether piety is good because it pleases the gods, or whether it pleases the gods because it is good. It was suggested we could pose the same question with respect to karma. If we do, it seems we will reach the conclusion that the second option is correct, namely that acts have good karmic consequences because they are good acts: they are not good acts because they have good consequences, as consequentialism would suggest. Why are the acts in question good? Let us recall that the Buddha defined karma not in terms of consequences but by reference to intention. It is the intention (*cetanā*) as shaped by the roots of good and evil (*kusala/akusala mūla*) that is determinative. Thus, the doctrine of karma does not provide support for a consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics because the right act is defined by what *precedes* it (intention and motivation) not by what *follows* it (good or bad consequences).

Having considered these general similarities, in the remainder of the chapter we consider two attempts to interpret Buddhist ethics as consequentialist. The first portrays Buddhism as a form of 'negative' consequentialism that defines the good as the reduction of suffering. The second proposes an 'objective list' formulation.

2 The 'Nirodha View'

Daniel Breyer argues that Buddhism recognizes only a single intrinsic good, namely the absence of suffering. The 'Nirodha view' is the name he gives to this 'monistic account of the ultimate good' (Breyer 2015, 549). He writes 'My view is that the Pāli Buddhist tradition endorses a distinctive negative axiology, according to which only the elimination of suffering (i.e. *dukkha/duḥkha*) is ultimately good' (Breyer 2015, 541).

As the name suggests, well-being is here identified exclusively with welfare understood as the absence of suffering (Breyer, 2015). Moral good (such as the performance of good deeds) is seen as having only instrumental value as a means to welfare. The theory is hedonistic since it defines the good in terms of pleasure and pain, and it is consequentialist in defining right acts as those that minimise suffering. The goal of minimising suffering has a strong appeal to consequentialists: David Benatar is another consequentialist philosopher who has set out similar views independently of Buddhism (Benatar 2017; 2008).

As a prelude to setting out his position Breyer considers a formulation of the good proposed by Owen Flanagan. Flanagan defines the Buddhist conception of well-being as 'a stable sense of serenity and contentment caused or constituted by wisdom and virtue' (Breyer 2015, 536). This is referred to as the 'Nirvana view,' and on this account the good (nirvana) consists of three things: mental serenity, wisdom, and virtue. We note that these are all psychological or 'internal' goods. The problem Breyer identifies with this view is also pointed out by Charles Goodman, namely that worldly happiness is excluded even though Buddhism appears to value it. Apparently, then, the 'Nirvana view' defines the good too narrowly. Breyer believes the Nirodha view remedies this by including worldly happiness (understood as a reduction in suffering) in its scope

> The '**Nirvana view**' proposed by Owen Flanagan defines nirvana as 'a stable sense of serenity and contentment caused or constituted by wisdom and virtue'. It will be seen that the definition omits any reference to prudential good.

It is certainly correct to say that suffering is a central concern of Buddhism. This is evident from the Four Noble Truths, the first of which is the truth of suffering (*dukkha*) and the third of which is *nirodha*, or the end of suffering. Apart from the formulation of the Four Noble Truths, there are textual

passages that seem to confirm that Buddhism's primary focus is the reduction of suffering. In the Alagaddūpama Sutta (Discourse of the Parable of the Water Snake) which we discussed in Chapter 8, the Buddha famously stated, 'Bhikkhus, both formally and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering' (MN i.140:234).

Such statements, however, need to be read in context, and we note that the Buddha made this remark in response to the charge that he taught the annihilation of a self. His rhetorical point was that the *only* sense in which he could be regarded as a nihilist was in respect of the annihilation of suffering. This differs from the sense in which his words are commonly taken, namely that the annihilation of suffering is the *only* goal of his teachings. This would be tantamount to him claiming that the goal of his teachings was mundane (*lokiya*) since suffering is a worldly value. It seems more likely that his purpose here, as on other occasions, was to redirect attention from speculative to practical matters.

> According to the **Nirodha view** the Pāli Buddhist tradition endorses a distinctive negative axiology, according to which only the elimination of suffering (*dukkha*) is ultimately good.

Nirodha in the Early Teachings

Some early scholars believed that the emphasis on suffering dates from a later stage in the evolution of Buddhism. I.B.Horner followed Mrs Rhys Davids in detecting two phases in early Buddhist thought. Horner describes these two phases in terms of a decline, as follows: 'During this [first] period, the original dhamma, a teaching which would appeal to every man, was transformed into a gospel in which "stopping" (nirodha) was taught as a cure for ill (dukkha). Such was the monkish contribution to Gotama's doctrine' (Horner 1936, 27). She speaks again of this later phase as 'a time when the domination of monkdom, insisting on the escape from Ill, had begun its work of deterioration' (Horner 1936, 36). This decline continued over succeeding centuries, such that:

> By the time that Buddhaghosa flourished the teaching of the Founder had, it must be admitted, degenerated into a pessimistic doctrine. The world, so it had come to be held, was full of evil and pain, from which the wise man would attempt to escape by cutting through the round of *saṃsāra*. (Horner 1936, 168)

Such, according to Horner, was the origin of the doctrine of 'nirodha'. To express Horner's thesis in terms of ethical theory, she is claiming that Buddhism in its earliest phase was Perfectionist, with a corresponding belief in the possibility of 'an infinite improvement, enrichment, and development of the self' (Horner 1936, 283). In a later 'monkish' phase this degenerated into a form of negative consequentialism.

Modern scholars have also detected a similar discrepancy between earlier and later values. Grace Burford finds that the teachings of one early text (the Aṭṭhakavagga of the Sutta Nipāta) differ from those of its later commentaries, and contends that 'somewhere along the hermeneutical line [...] the normative Theravāda Buddhist value theory lost its coherence, since the Theravāda teachings concerning the ideal goal and the actions that bring a person closer to the *summum bonum* are inconsistent' (Burford 1991, 3). The inconsistency lies in the fact that the earlier teachings affirm the value of wise and peaceful living in the world while the later ones display an anti-worldly concern with escaping from the round of rebirth.

James Egge has likewise detected a trend in early Buddhism whereby 'karmic discourse' became increasingly influential and the soteriological problem was redefined as the escape from rebirth and its attendant suffering rather than self-perfection. He points out that the oldest verse anthologies do not employ karmic discourse but 'speak of purifying the mind of craving, ignorance, and other harmful mental states' (Egge 2015, 47). The thesis of a deterioration from an early optimistic form of Buddhism to a later more pessimistic one – with a corresponding shift in emphasis from virtue to welfare – is by no means universally accepted but certainly bears noting.

Suffering or Flourishing?

As a skilful teacher, the Buddha delivered his message in a variety of ways for different audiences. References to suffering have their place and serve to instil urgency, to concentrate minds, and to discourage metaphysical speculation. In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha formulated the basic existential problem as the deprivation of well-being – the state of *dukkha* – but the solution he proposed was the cultivation of virtue, as set out in the Eightfold Path. Far from negative, the axiology associated with this path is positive, fulfilling, and spiritually uplifting.

It seems clear the Buddha believed there is more to a flourishing life than the bare absence of suffering. The goal of Buddhist practice is often formulated in positive terms. A verse from the Dhammapada is said to sum up the entire body of the teachings: 'Cease to do evil, do what is good,

purify the mind. This is the teaching of the Buddhas.' There is no mention of suffering here. The Buddha himself says that he left home 'in search of what is good (*kusala*)' (MN i.163:256), which sounds more like a quest for excellence rather than a crusade against suffering. The definition of nirvana as the elimination of greed, hatred, and delusion (SN iv.251:1294) also suggests the primary objective is the pursuit of virtue. And as we saw in the Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta, the Buddha declared 'the highest things in the world' to be wisdom and virtue rather than the end of suffering. These statements give reason to think that there is more to the Buddhist idea of well-being than the elimination of suffering.

> It seems clear the Buddha believed there is more to a flourishing human life than the bare absence of suffering. The goal of Buddhist practice is often formulated in positive terms as joyful and fulfilling.

Motivation

From a common-sense point of view, it seems unlikely that the ultimate point of every action is the reduction of suffering. We noted that both Buddhaghosa and Aristotle distinguished three motivations for human action: the pleasant, the noble, and the useful. The 'Nirodha view' recognises only the first (the pleasant). If you ask yourself why you are reading this book, however, the first answer that occurs to you is unlikely to be 'to reduce suffering.' Indeed, reading the book might actually cause your suffering to increase but hopefully you think it worthwhile for one of the other two reasons: perhaps it contributes to a more noble or intrinsically valuable end like knowledge, or is useful for passing an exam.

On a somewhat grander scale, when people undertake difficult and dangerous challenges, it is rarely the avoidance of suffering that motivates them. Facing challenges and overcoming adversity is part and parcel of a fulfilling life, regardless of the suffering involved. It is also the way virtues like patience and courage are developed. Suffering is a risk inherent in the pursuit of any good. Even mundane activities like maintaining friendships require effort and commitment, and may involve frustration, inconvenience, and sacrifice, but are generally thought to be worthwhile, nonetheless. A person who valued friendship only because it reduced suffering would be a poor type of friend. Vulnerability to suffering is implicit in sentiments like love, compassion, and trust, and a life without these sentiments, even if free of suffering, would be a shallow one. Suffering is a risk we run whenever

we pursue something of value, and someone who made the avoidance of suffering his sole priority is unlikely to be seen as an exemplary individual.

> Suffering is a risk inherent in the pursuit of any good and someone who made the avoidance of suffering his sole priority is unlikely to be regarded as an exemplary individual.

We can see that the Buddha did not do this. He chose to teach the Dharma despite being aware it would be 'wearisome' and 'troublesome' for him, so much so that at first 'his mind inclined to living at ease, to not teaching the Dhamma' (SN i.136:231). The value monist will no doubt reply that the Buddha, as a good consequentialist, was concerned with the overall amount of suffering in the world, and calculated that his personal suffering would be outweighed by the reduction in suffering overall from him teaching the Dhamma. The sources do not say, however, that the Buddha was motivated by a calculation of this kind but simply that he taught the Dhamma 'out of compassion for beings' (SN i.138:233).

Summary

The main problem with Breyer's proposal is that it identifies happiness with prudential good. This reduces Buddhism to a spiritual analgesic whose only purpose is to dull the pain of suffering. The same objective could be largely secured through a heavenly rebirth, to which final nirvana seems to offer little more than an extended expiry date. Such a conception of well-being bears comparison with David Pearce's transhumanist 'Abolition Project' (www.abolitionist.com) which seeks to eliminate suffering by technological means. Invoking the support of Buddhism for his project, Pearce writes:

> If one is a scientifically enlightened **Buddhist**, then the abolitionist project follows too. Buddhists, uniquely among the world's religions, focus on the primacy of suffering in the living world. Buddhists may think that the Noble Eightfold Path offers a surer route to Nirvana than genetic engineering; but it's hard for a Buddhist to argue in principle against biotech if it works. Buddhists focus on relieving suffering via the extinction of desire; yet it's worth noting this extinction is technically optional, and might arguably lead to a stagnant society. Instead it's possible both to abolish suffering *and* continue to have all manner of desires.[1]

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[1] https://www.abolitionist.com/, original emphasis.

If a technological solution to suffering were possible, of course, Buddhism would be redundant. It would also seem that for 'Buddhist modernists' (to be discussed in the next chapter) who do not believe in rebirth, suicide would provide the surest path to well-being.

A merit of the 'Nirodha view' is that it gives due weight to the value of prudential good. Another is that it sets out a graduated path to nirvana. Breyer writes: 'the *Nirodha* View allows for a continuum view of well-being with *nirvāṇa*-in-this-life serving as a regulative ideal toward which we aspire, but with many stages of genuine well-being along the way' (Breyer 2015, 548). It also presents a path to happiness that is the same for laity, monks, and *arahants*. As Breyer writes: 'Whatever the conventional facts about persons might be, they hold for *all* persons. We all share in the same human condition' (Breyer 2015, 545).

> The evidence shows that Buddhist ethics is pluralistic in terms of value and nirvanic well-being cannot be reduced to a single 'master value' like the elimination of suffering.

However, whereas Breyer locates the similarity among sentient beings in their shared vulnerability to suffering, we can also locate the commonality in the capacity to achieve fulfilment through virtue. This seems more consistent with the position of the mainstream tradition that *sīla* and *paññā* have intrinsic value as integral constituents of the awakened state. It thus seems more plausible to describe the position we find in the Pali canon as axiological pluralism as opposed to Breyer's monism. If this is correct, nirvanic well-being cannot be reduced to a single 'master value' like the reduction of suffering.

3 A List Conception of the Good

While Breyer does not describe it in this way, we could think of the 'Nirodha view' as an 'objective list' consisting of a single item (the reduction of suffering). As noted, this formulation seems limited because there is reason to think that virtue plays more than an instrumental role in well-being. The trick, it seems, is to compose an objective list that does not omit any essential element of well-being. In this respect, Charles Goodman has proposed a list of two items, namely virtue and 'worldly happiness'. While reductionist to a degree, this formulation avoids the more extreme reductionism of a monistic conception like Breyer's.

> A successful 'objective list' should itemise the essential elements of well-being as understood in Buddhism. The objective list proposed by Charles Goodman identifies two elements, namely virtue and 'worldly happiness'.

Goodman's formulation of well-being is elaborated in the context of an interpretation of Buddhist ethics as 'character consequentialism'. The first of the two items on his objective list – virtue – is uncontroversial in the sense of meriting a place on the list. To identify the good with virtue alone, however, would be a form of the 'Nirvana view,' which Goodman rejects for reasons discussed earlier (it omits any role for prudential good). He therefore supplements virtue with a second intrinsic good initially described as 'worldly prosperity' or 'worldly success' before being defined more narrowly as 'pleasures and happiness,' or more commonly 'happiness.' Let us retrace the steps that lead Goodman to identify 'happiness' as the sole prudential good.

Goodman populates his objective list with values we are familiar with from the Lakkhaṇa Sutta:

> Monks, in whatever former life the *Tathāgata* ... desired the welfare of the many, their advantage, comfort, freedom from bondage, thinking how they might increase in faith, morality, learning, renunciation, in Dhamma, in wisdom, in wealth and possessions, in bipeds and quadrupeds, in wives and children, in servants, workers, and helpers, in relatives, friends and acquaintances. (DN iii.164:452)

With respect to this passage Goodman comments:

> The wording of the passage clearly implies that the things that the Buddha ... sought to increase are components of welfare. These components seem to fall into two classes: forms of worldly prosperity, such as 'wealth and possessions,' and forms of virtue, such as 'faith, morality, learning, renunciation'. (Goodman 2009, 60)

Based on this passage the two values to be included on the objective list are prudential good and virtue. Goodman next proceeds to enquire whether the items mentioned in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta as constitutive of 'worldly prosperity' or 'worldly success' should be interpreted 'as components of well-being in

their own right and thus as intrinsic goods. Or should we regard them as means to something else?' (Goodman 2009, 60). He rejects the first option and concludes 'wealth and other forms of worldly success are valuable only as a means to the happiness of oneself and others'. In sum, Goodman writes: 'On my interpretation of the Pāli canon, wealth and the other external trappings of conventional success are instrumentally valuable, and the pleasures and happiness that can result from them are intrinsically valuable' (Goodman 2009, 63).

> By 'worldly happiness' Goodman appears to mean pleasure (*sukha*). The six classes of prudential goods we identified in chapter five have thus been boiled down to one.

No further specification of 'pleasures and happiness' is provided, but it appears these are 'internal' goods and correspond to what Buddhist sources know as *sukha*. The six classes of prudential goods we identified in Chapter 5 as constituting 'worldly well-being', therefore, have here been reduced to one, namely *sukha*.

Earthly Pleasures

As we saw in Chapter 5, *sukha* denotes a subjective experience of pleasure or happiness. *Sukha* is a feeling or sensation, and what makes such feelings good is the property of being pleasant. Goodman does not distinguish between sensual and other forms of pleasure, but it is clear he believes sensual pleasure has intrinsic worth. Buddhism, however, does not appear to consider sensual pleasure as an intrinsic good. Endless warnings about *kāmasukha* could be cited, all confirming that sensual pleasures 'do not give permanent satisfaction; the happiness which they yield is only a deception, or a dream, from which the dreamer awakens with sorrow and regret.' This does not sound like a promising candidate for an intrinsic value, which raises the question why it merits a place on the list. Goodman answers this objection in two ways: first, by adducing textual evidence to defend the claim that sensual pleasures have intrinsic value; and second, by suggesting that the sources condemn sensual pleasures not because they lack intrinsic value but because of the dangers associated with them, such as the risk of attachment.

In Defence of Sensual Pleasure

Only one piece of textual evidence is adduced to show that sensual pleasures have intrinsic value. This is a passage from the Māgandiya Sutta (MN 75) comparing sensual pleasures to the experience of a leper scratching a sore. After quoting this passage, Goodman asks: 'Is this passage telling us that the enjoyment of sensual pleasures is entirely an illusion, and that there is nothing at all good about these pleasures?' His answer is in the negative, and the construction he places on the passage is that sensual pleasures even in such circumstances 'have a small amount of intrinsic value' (Goodman 2009, 64).

This seems to be a misreading. What the passage is saying is that although sensual pleasure is not an illusion (it exists ontologically) it does not contribute to well-being. We know the feeling of pleasure is not an illusion, because the passage itself states that there are beings who, 'devoured by craving ... find a certain measure of satisfaction and enjoyment in dependence on the five cords of sensual pleasure' (Goodman 2009, 64). The sensation of pleasure, then, is real enough. The question, however, is whether there is anything *good* about sensual pleasure of the kind described. The answer is emphatically in the negative. The passage states that sensual pleasures, whether in the past, present or future, are 'painful to touch, hot, and scorching' (Goodman 2009, 63). This seems to be a clear refutation of the claim that sensual pleasure has intrinsic worth.

> Pleasure does not have intrinsic value. Its value depends on its source.

Reflecting further on the passage, we see that the leper feels happy only because the pleasure of scratching makes him forget his true condition. He certainly feels pleasure, and may judge it to be good, but the point is that his judgement is distorted, and this blinds him to the reality of his situation. The leper's situation is far from happy, but the experience of pleasure deceives him into thinking, for one sweet moment, that all is well.

The seductive nature of sensual pleasure leads people to *mistake* suffering for happiness. The passage makes this clear when it says that such people: 'have faculties that are impaired; thus, though sensual pleasures are actually painful to touch, they acquire a *mistaken perception* of them as pleasant' (Goodman 2009, 63 emphasis added). To impute intrinsic value to sensual pleasure is thus to be deluded about what has value in objective terms. It is a misconception (*vipallāsa*), like taking what is ugly (*asubha*) to be beautiful (*subha*), the last of the four 'inversions of perception, mind, and

view' (*saññāvipallāsā cittavipallāsā diṭṭhivipallāsā*) (AN ii.52: 437f). The point of the passage is not that sensual pleasure has intrinsic value (however limited) but, on the contrary, that it is 'fool's gold' and only the deluded believe it to have worth. Those who see rightly understand its true nature and do not allow themselves to be diverted from the path by hedonistic distractions.

The Problem of Attachment

Goodman offers two further reasons to explain why the sources might be critical of sensual pleasures, despite them having (as he believes) intrinsic worth. One is that in the pursuit of sensual pleasures others may be harmed. This is certainly possible, but there are many sensual pleasures that harm no-one (the enjoyment of a fine meal or a hot bath, for example), and where others are involved it is possible to take precautions against harming.

The second and more serious drawback is that it is easy to become attached to sensual pleasure. Again, this is true, and it is something Buddhism warns against. The danger in attachment where Buddhism is concerned, however, as mentioned in Chapter 2, relates to attachment to *what is unwholesome*. If sensual pleasure is an intrinsic good, in the way that virtue is an intrinsic good, it is unclear why attachment is a problem. Why should an intrinsic good not be enthusiastically pursued?

After all, the enthusiastic pursuit of the Dhamma is highly commended. We see that a good monk is one who 'loves the Dhamma' (*dhammakāmo*) and 'delights in hearing it' (*piyasamudāhāro*); he is one who 'ever strives to arouse energy, to get rid of unwholesome states, to establish wholesome states, untiringly and energetically striving to keep such good states and never shaking off the burden' (DN iii.267:508). The faculty of energy (*viriyindriyam*) is defined in the Dhammasaṅgaṇi as 'the striving and the onward effort, the exertion and endeavour, the zeal and ardour, the vigour and fortitude, the state of unfaltering effort, the state of sustained desire, the state of unflinching endurance' (trans Rhys Davids 1974, 15f). The commentator Dhammapāla explains the meaning of strong desire (*chandatā*) as follows:

> Strong desire (*chandatā*): wholesome desire, the wish for accomplishment. One possessed of the aforesaid qualities must have strong desire, yearning, and longing to practice the dhammas culminating in Buddhahood. Only then does his aspiration succeed. (Bodhi 2007, 253)

The virtuous monk is thus deeply attached – in the sense of fully committed both mentally and emotionally – to what is wholesome. Desire for the good is essential for liberation.

We can illustrate the problem in another way. Let us grant for a moment that sensual pleasure really is an intrinsic good, marred only by the risks of accidentally harming others or engendering craving. The awakened are presumably immune to both these risks, and so there appears to be no reason they should not enjoy this intrinsic good to the full. We observed in Chapter 5 that such is the case with non-sensual pleasure. The Buddha stated, 'I am not afraid of that pleasure since it has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states' (MN i.246f:340). If sensual pleasure is also an intrinsic good, we would expect to see the awakened relishing it in the same way, but we see nothing of the kind. Instead, is said that a virtuous *bhikkhu* practices 'for disenchantment with sensual pleasures, dispassion towards them, and for their cessation' (AN i.64:156). Thus, even when it does *not* harm others or lead to attachment, sensual pleasure is disparaged.

The Heavens

It would seem that the case for sensual pleasure having intrinsic value must be given up, requiring its exclusion from the objective list. Goodman, however, has a further argument which turns the objection around. Supposing it were true, he suggests, that sensual pleasures have no intrinsic value, it would follow that 'there would be nothing good about being born in the heavens, since the only good thing about the heavens is the pleasures one can enjoy there' (Goodman 2009, 64). He suggests the drawbacks with earthly sensual pleasure just mentioned (such as harming others and giving rise to attachment) are mitigated in heaven, because pleasure there is easily accessible. He notes that the Buddha often speaks in positive terms of a heavenly rebirth and believes this shows that the pleasure of the heavens must be intrinsically good. He sums up as follows:

> In short: if life in heaven is not an effective means to spiritual progress, and if the pleasures of heaven are not intrinsically good, then it makes no sense for the Buddha to praise the heavens or give others advice about how to get there. But he does both of these things; so the pleasures of heaven must be intrinsically good (Goodman 2009, 66).

There are two propositions here that can be considered separately. These are: i) the pleasures of heaven are intrinsically good; ii) heaven is an effective

means to spiritual progress. First, it should first be pointed out that neither pleasure nor any of the other prudential goods we considered in Chapter 5 has intrinsic value. We described their value as non-ultimate (and non-instrumental). Their value is derivative and depends on their source. When their source is virtue – as in the case of 'righteous wealth righteously gained' – they have value and contribute to well-being. When their source is vice, they do not. This typically happens when prudential goods are pursued as ends in themselves.

We can agree that the pleasures of the heavens are good or wholesome. However, this is only because we know *a priori* that the pleasure experienced in heaven has virtue as its source. A heavenly rebirth can only be obtained through virtuous means. Hence it is said:

> Therefore one should do what is good
> As a collection for the future life.
> Merits are the support for living beings
> [When they arise] in the other world. (SN i.72:168)

And as the Dhammapada has it:

> Just as a traveller who has been long absent and comes back safe and sound is greeted on his return by his kinsfolk, friends and comrades, in the same way when a man passes from this world to another after a life of merit, so his good deeds welcome him as dear kinsmen on his return. (Dhp 219-220)

This is not necessarily the case on earth, of course, where pleasure may arise from either virtue or vice. As mentioned previously, sexual pleasure may be enjoyed both in marriage and in adultery, but while the former is morally wholesome, the latter is not (adultery is prohibited by the third precept). It is the enjoyment of *unwholesome* pleasure that is likened to the pleasure of a leper scratching a sore (the physical sickness of leprosy symbolizes the moral sickness of vice). It is difficult to imagine how anyone can be made 'better off' by the experience of pleasure arising from immorality.

> Q. If pleasure is not an intrinsic good, why is the pleasure of the heavens good?
> A. Because the value of pleasure depends on its source, and the pleasure of heaven is the reward of virtue in a previous life.

With respect to the second proposition, Goodman asks why the Buddha praises the heavens if they are not an effective means to spiritual progress. The answer is that things can be praised for different reasons, and not everything that is praised need be *morally* good. We saw that in the Lakkhaṇa Sutta the Buddha also praises *earthly* prudential goods. Presumably, he does not do so because he thinks they are a means to spiritual progress. Rather he praises these goods, whether in their earthly or heavenly form, for their *prudential* rather than *moral* value.

There is, of course, a well-known drawback to the heavens, namely that the enjoyment of prudential goods there can lead to complacency. Because of its pleasant nature there is no incentive in heaven to confront the problem of suffering. The 'four sights' are only seen on earth. This is the reason the Buddha says that monks are 'repelled, humiliated, and disgusted with a celestial life span, celestial beauty, celestial happiness, celestial glory, and celestial authority' (AN i.115:213). The happiness of the heavens is incomplete because there one may lack the wisdom to see that the condition is still *saṃsāric* and subject to *dukkha*. No doubt this is the reason the Buddha says that a human rebirth is the equivalent of heaven for the gods (Iti.76). The Buddha praises the heavens, in sum, because it is where the virtuous receive their just reward, but this praise is tempered by the recognition that the happiness of heaven is of a derivative kind. It is not the unblemished happiness of virtue.

The Objective List and Buddhist Values

In sum, Goodman correctly recognizes that the 'Nirvana view' is flawed. His proposed solution of supplementing virtue with happiness in an objective list format, however, seems incompatible with Buddhist axiology. There are two main problems. The first is that the objective list format is insufficiently nuanced to capture the nature of the relationship between virtue and prudential good. The list itemizes two apparently heterogeneous values constituting what Goodman characterizes as 'a dichotomous conception of well-being' (Goodman 2009, 61). Here, virtue and worldly happiness appear as equal and autonomous values. According to the Pali canon, however, they are neither equal nor autonomous.

Buddhism believes that prudential good stands in a subordinate and dependent relationship to moral good. It is ennobled by virtue and debased by vice. Worldly happiness may be an ontological good, but it is only a *moral* good when it contributes to well-being under the direction of virtue. The pursuit of worldly happiness when disassociated from virtue is *detrimental* to well-

being. It is amply demonstrated in the sources that to pursue prudential good independently of virtue leads to perdition. In this respect Buddhism shares Kant's belief that moral virtue is a condition of happiness, and there is no way to attain lasting happiness without it. Confucius expresses a similar view when he says 'The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain' (*Analects* 4.16).[2] The objective list format, then, cannot accommodate the required axiological alignment between the two components of well-being it identifies.

> There are two problems with the 'objective list' formulation. 1) It fails to capture the interdependent nature of the relationship between virtue and prudential good. 2) It reduces all prudential good to a single value, namely pleasure (*sukha*).

A second problem concerns the reduction of 'worldly happiness' to *sukha*. This position is incompatible with the pluralism we identified in the sources. As we saw in our review of worldly well-being in Chapter 5, a wide range of goods – including *sukha* – are recognized as making individual and distinctive contributions to well-being. Perhaps the reductionism of the objective list could be overcome by expanding the definition of 'worldly happiness' to include all of the prudential goods mentioned in Chapter 5. In Buddhist terminology this would involve pairing virtue (*kusala*) not with *sukha* but with *puñña*. This would accord better with traditional formulations. If we unpack the category of prudential good along the lines suggested in Chapter 5 we might end up with an objective list of seven items: moral virtue (*sīla*), epistemic virtue (*paññā*), economic prosperity, personal relationships, physical and mental integrity, social status, and post-mortem destination.

Even if we populate the list in this way, however, the format remains problematic. As already stated, no such listing could capture the necessary axiological alignment between virtue and the other goods. Furthermore, while we discovered no explicit hierarchical ranking among prudential goods, the sources seem to regard certain of them (such as friendship) as more valuable than others. It is unclear how an objective list would reflect this prioritization.

In conclusion, in this chapter we examined two attempts to interpret Buddhist ethics as forms of consequentialism. We noticed some resemblances between Buddhism and consequentialism, notably a concern with universal happiness, but also some problematic differences. These relate both

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[2]Quoted in Cokelet (2016, 204).

to consequentialism's theory of the good and its theory of the right. The consequentialist theory of the good in the two examples we considered is reductionist in that it shrinks the diverse values Buddhism recognises down to one or two. In the case of Breyer's 'Nirodha view' it is one, namely the reduction of suffering. In the case of Goodman's 'objective list view' it is two, namely virtue and 'worldly happiness', which on closer examination turns out to mean pleasure (*sukha*). With respect to prudential good, Goodman's view is a mirror-image of Breyer's, in that Breyer values a reduction is suffering while Goodman values an increase in happiness. Neither formulation, however, captures the diversity of the values we see mentioned in the sources. It is hard to believe, for example, that friendship is valued solely because it reduces suffering (Breyer) or because it increases 'pleasure and happiness' (Goodman). There is also a problem with the consequentialist theory of the right. Buddhism does not appear to teach that an act is right based solely on whether it reduces suffering or increases pleasure. A morally right act will often have this effect, but it is not right for this reason. Rather it is right because it is *kusala*, or virtuous.

4   Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Consequentialism is a generic term describing theories of ethics which hold that acts are to be assessed solely by reference to their consequences. The term dates from the 1950s and supersedes the older term 'Utilitarianism.'
- Consequentialism includes both a theory of the good and a theory of the right. The theory of the good tells us what the good consists of (e.g. pleasure). The theory of the right tells us that the right act is the one that maximises the good.
- There are many varieties of Consequentialism, such as 'act' and 'rule', 'agent-relative' and 'agent-neutral', and different ways of counting consequences.
- The 'Nirvana view' is the thesis that well-being consists solely of virtue and excludes prudential good.
- The 'Nirodha view' is a consequentialist interpretation of Buddhist ethics that identifies well-being exclusively with the reduction of suffering. This is a 'monistic' theory because it identifies the good with a single value (the reduction of suffering).
- The 'Objective List' view defines well-being as consisting of virtue and worldly happiness. Because it aims to maximise virtue it can also be characterised as a form of 'character consequentialism.'
- A problem with the 'objective list' view is that it portrays virtue and worldly happiness as independent values, whereas Buddhism sees them as interrelated. Furthermore, Buddhism teaches that worldly happiness only contributes to well-being when it has virtue as its source.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the differences between 'act' and 'rule' consequential-ism.
2. What is the difference between a 'theory of the good' and a 'theory of the right'?
3. Explain the difference between 'agent-relative' and 'agent-neutral' versions of consequentialism.
4. What is the main claim of the 'Nirodha view'? What are its strengths and weaknesses?
5. If you had to make an 'objective list' of values, what would put on it? In other words, what things are necessary, in your view, for a happy life?
6. Can an 'objective list' of goods accurately reflect the Buddhist understanding of well-being (nirvana)?

Further Reading

- Edelglass, William 'Buddhist Ethics and Western Moral Philosophy.' In *A Companion to Buddhist Philosophy*, 476–90. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.
- Goodman, C. *Consequences of Compassion: An Interpretation and Defense of Buddhist Ethics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- *Gowans, Christopher W. *Buddhist Moral Philosophy: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis, 2015. Ch.6 'The Consequentialist Interpretation'.
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11 Engaged Buddhism

1 In this Chapter

Engaged Buddhism is a modern movement that some regard as an independent Buddhist 'vehicle.' Engaged Buddhism overlaps with Buddhist ethics to some degree but differs in having a social and political focus and in being primarily a practice rather than an academic discipline. In this chapter we review the origins of the Engaged Buddhist movement and introduce some of its main protagonists. We consider the debate over whether Engaged Buddhism is something new or whether Buddhism has always been 'engaged'. We also consider a related development known as 'Buddhist modernism' that breaks with tradition in rejecting beliefs like karma and rebirth as incompatible with modern science. Finally, we take up again a theme from our discussion of eudaimonism in chapter nine and consider a proposal for a modernist form of well-being known as 'eudaimonic enlightenment' that blends Buddhist and Western values.

2 Origins

Engaged Buddhism emerged as a distinct movement in the 1960s and subsequent decades. It focuses on questions of public policy such as social justice, human rights, poverty, politics, violence, and the environment. As noted, there is a degree of overlap with Buddhist ethics in terms of the issues studied and sources used. However, whereas Buddhist ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that studies Buddhist teachings, Engaged Buddhism is a form of Buddhist practice that applies those teachings to political and social issues. Many of those active in the field of Engaged Buddhism are 'scholar-practitioners', in other words individuals with one foot in the academy and the other in Buddhist communities.

The promotion of Engaged Buddhism owes much to the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (b.1926). Nhat Hanh was ordained as a monk at the age of sixteen and subsequently spent periods abroad in the USA teaching at Princeton and Cornell universities. Following the communist victory in Vietnam he was refused re-entry to the country and established a community at Plum Village in the south of France. He coined the phrase 'socially engaged Buddhism' in 1963 as a label for three Vietnamese ideas emphasizing awareness in daily life; social service; and social activism. This threefold emphasis not only establishes a connection with socio-political issues but also involves the lives of families and communities. In this way, Engaged Buddhism has an impact on the lives of individual Buddhists living 'in the world'.

> Buddhist ethics is a branch of moral philosophy that studies Buddhist teachings, whereas Engaged Buddhism is a form of Buddhist practice that applies Buddhist teachings to political and social issues.

The movement Nhat Hanh helped found has become so successful worldwide that one scholar – Christopher Queen – has argued that it constitutes a new 'vehicle', joining the previously identified three vehicles of Buddhism (Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna). As with the preceding vehicles, there is considerable internal diversity within Engaged Buddhism. Although it has many illustrious figureheads, some of whom will be mentioned below, it is not a unified movement and lacks an official hierarchy.

Inspired by its social ideals, engaged activists have worked to extend the traditional principles of morality into a comprehensive program of Buddhist social ethics. Critical to the attempt is the ambition to extend the traditional notion of moral practice beyond the Five Precepts. An example of this can be seen in the supplementary fourteen precepts of the Tiep Hien Order or 'Order of Interbeing', a community of activist-practitioners founded by Nhat Hanh in 1964.

The 14 Precepts of the 'Order of Interbeing'

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even a Buddhist one.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless absolute truth.
3. Do not force others to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education.

4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes to suffering.

5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions remain hungry.

6. Do not maintain anger or hatred.

7. Do not lose yourself in distraction, inwardly or outwardly.

8. Do not utter words that can create discord or cause your community to split apart.

9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal advantage or to impress people.

10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform your community into a political party.

11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans or nature.

12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill.

13. Possess nothing that should belong to others.

14. Do not mistreat your body.

When discussing Mahāyāna Buddhism in Chapter 2, we noted it extended the early conception of *śīla* by adding two further levels on top of the basic practice of self-restraint. An attempt to expand traditional moral practice even further is the suggestion by Queen that there are in fact four different 'styles' of Buddhist ethics.

> Christopher Queen identifies four 'styles' of Buddhist ethics:
>
> 1. The Ethics of Discipline
> 2. The Ethics of Virtue
> 3. The Ethics of Altruism
> 4. The Ethics of Engagement.

The first is 'The Ethics of Discipline', in which the conduct caused by mental impurities fuelled by the 'three poisons' of greed, hatred, and delusion are combatted by observing the five vows of the laity. Here the focus is on the individual Buddhist practitioner. Next comes 'The Ethics of Virtue', in which the individual's relationship with others comes more clearly into focus by engaging in such practices as loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. This marks a shift from observing strict rules to following a more internally enforced ethical framework. Third, there is 'The Ethics of Altruism', in which service to others predominates. Finally – and this is the specific contribution of Engaged Buddhism – there is the comprehensive 'Ethics of Engagement', in which the three previous prescriptions for daily living are applied to the overall concern for a better society, which means

creating new social institutions and relationships. Since social institutions are believed to contribute to the arising of greed, hatred, and delusion, these new or reformed institutions will provide better spiritual alternatives. Such an approach involves, as Queen maintains, awareness, identification of the self and the world, and a profound call to action.

3 Engaged Buddhist Organisations

Although Buddhist communities from the major sectarian traditions have extensive programs in various aspects of Engaged Buddhism, one of the most comprehensive is that of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship based in Berkeley, California. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship began in 1978 in Hawaii at the Maui Zendo as a project jointly founded by Robert and Anne Aitken, Nelson Foster, and a few of their Zen friends. Within a short time, this first American expression of socially engaged Buddhism was joined by an eclectic collection of Dharma friends that included beat poet Gary Snyder, academics, scholar Alfred Bloom, Buddhist activist Joanna Macy, ex-Theravāda monk Jack Kornfield, and a number of other American convert practitioners.

The five aims of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship are: 1) to make public witness to Buddhist practice and interdependence as a way of peace and protection for all beings; 2) to raise peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice concerns among North American Buddhists; 3) to bring a Buddhist perspective of non-duality to contemporary social action and environmental movements; 4) to encourage the practice of non-violence based on the rich resources of traditional Buddhist and Western spiritual teachings; 5) to offer avenues for dialogue and exchange among the diverse North American and world *saṅghas*. The BPF is active largely among the American convert Buddhist population, but works extensively with ethnic Buddhists and people of colour in an effort to move beyond ethnic or racial insensitivities.

> Engaged Buddhist groups include The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, The International Network of Engaged Buddhists, the Tzu Chi Foundation, Buddhist Global Relief, the Zen Peacemaker Order, and the Buddhist Action Coalition.

The international work of the BPF is organized through its association with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), launched in February 1989 in Thailand by peace activist Sulak Sivaraksa. The INEB

has the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Maha Ghosananda as patrons. Sivaraksa is of Chinese descent and was born in Bangkok in 1933. His criticisms of the Thai government led to him being imprisoned and exiled on several occasions. Sivaraksa invokes traditional Buddhist values to challenge the exploitation he sees as endemic in global capitalism. Accordingly, he reinterprets the Five Precepts as obligations to: 1) prevent death by not letting people die of hunger; 2) to not overexploit natural resources; 3) to not allow the exploitation of women; 4) to reject untruth such as 'fake news' and political propaganda; and 5) to replace the production of intoxicants like drugs and tobacco with basic staple foods like rice.

The INEB has groups in more than thirty countries working toward the advancement of Engaged Buddhism in an atmosphere of inter-Buddhist and inter-religious cooperation. Its aim is to support 'grassroots Dharma activism around the world'. Up to now, the major areas of INEB interest have been human rights, nonviolence, the environment, women's issues, alternative education, and the integration of spirituality and activism.

Another important organization is the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation established by the Taiwanese nun Cheng Yen. She was ordained by Humanistic Buddhism master Yin Shun in 1963 and was inspired to found Tzu Chi after a conversation with a Catholic nun who informed her about the charitable work carried out by the Catholic Church. Chen Yen began by helping poor families in Taiwan. Tzu Chi rapidly expanded and now provides medical care in its own hospitals and disaster relief in countries worldwide. Today it is one of the world's largest humanitarian organisations. Other engaged organisations include Buddhist Global Relief (founded by the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi), the Zen Peacemaker Order (founded in 1994 by Bernie Glassman Roshi), and the Buddhist Action Coalition (founded in 2018 and based at the Union Theological Seminary in New York).

4 Engaged Buddhism: Old or New?

Opinion is currently divided on to what extent Engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism forged by modernity in response to contemporary concerns, and to what extent it exhibits continuity with traditional attitudes. Thich Nhat Hanh has stated that Buddhists have always been socially engaged, and so a socially engaged Buddhism is 'nothing new'. Supporters of this view stress that the characterisation of Buddhism as 'world-renouncing' is a caricature and point to the concept of the bodhisattva in which selfless service to others is the supreme ideal. They also portray the Buddha himself

as a social activist who chose to reform society by founding a *saṅgha* rather than a kingdom.

Others claim that while social ideals may have been latent in Buddhist teachings they were not actualized until modern times, and therefore Engaged Buddhism constitutes a sufficient departure from tradition to merit recognition as a new movement in much the same way that Mahāyāna Buddhism came to be regarded as novel and distinctive. Arguments purporting to demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity with the past are commonly heard, and often refer to historical examples where Buddhism was seen to be more (or less) 'engaged'. Thomas Yarnall labels these two orientations 'traditionist' and 'modernist' (Yarnall 2003).

> Opinion is currently divided on to what extent Engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism forged by modernity in response to contemporary concerns, and to what extent it exhibits continuity with traditional Buddhism.

Some commentators suggest that Christianity has played a part in the emergence of Engaged Buddhism and see concern with social reform as inspired more by Christian notions of social service and activism than Buddhist teachings. The first stirrings of the Engaged Buddhist movement have been traced by some writers to the colonial period and the response of reformers like Anagārika Dharmapāla to Christian criticism that Buddhism was 'passive' and 'other-worldly'. Dharmapāla himself believed that modern-day Sinhalas had become indolent and lazy, unlike the 'true' Sinhalas of the past. His solution was to reform Buddhism and present its teachings as promoting an energetic life of good works and social service. Some commentators suggest that the West has a more positive 'world-affirming' outlook in contrast to a 'world-denying' attitude on the part of Buddhism which sees life in *saṃsāra* as a series of meaningless cycles. As W.H. Sheldon expressed it:

> Here then is precisely where the Western love of the world changes the whole perspective. This world is *worth saving*, in all its complexities and particulars … If this world is to be perpetuated and perfected, it must still be *this* world; in brief, it must *change* what is bad or imperfect within it into something good, also within it. (Quoted in King 2001, 250 original emphasis)

Others draw a parallel with the 'liberation theology' movement in Latin America and other parts of the developing world. In the book *Action* Dharma,

James Dietrick describes this mingling of cultural values as 'the infusion of Euro-American thought into the veins of Buddhist Asia' (Dietrick 2003, 203). The arguments go back and forth, but while it is fair to say that there is continuity at the level of values between ancient and modern Buddhism, there is undeniably discontinuity at the level of issues. The kinds of issues which occupy Engaged Buddhists are essentially of a contemporary nature and there is little evidence of concern for these matters in traditional scriptures.

Another term for 'engagement' is 'activism', which Thomas Tweed defines as 'the concern to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the political and economic spheres' (quoted in Lele 2019, 244). This activist mentality is shared by NGOs throughout the world, Buddhist and otherwise. Many Asian Engaged Buddhist leaders have spent time in the West, and their views reflect the influence of Western liberalism of a more or less radical kind.

5 Disengaged Buddhism

Amod Lele has argued that in their enthusiasm for activist causes, Engaged Buddhists have failed to take seriously a position he labels 'Disengaged Buddhism'. This position, he suggests, has a long and distinguished history, at least in Indian Buddhism if not elsewhere. 'Disengaged Buddhism,' as the name suggests, takes an opposite stance to Engaged Buddhism and believes that social and political activism is unfruitful and detrimental to spiritual progress.

Lele revisits a selection of texts from the classical period of Indian Buddhism (pre-eighth century CE) that are often adduced in support of the ideals of Engaged Buddhism because they stress the importance of virtues like compassion (*karuṇā*) and friendliness (*maitrī*). Engaged Buddhists take for granted that these virtues entail social and political activism, but Lele argues many sources discourage political activism on the ground that it can be harmful to spiritual well-being. Thus, while Mahāyāna authors like Śāntideva and Candrakīrti praise compassion and engagement this does not mean they support or encourage political activism or seek systemic social change. *Compassionate* action does not necessarily mean *social* action.

> **Disengaged Buddhism** is the view that social and political activism is unfruitful and can be detrimental to spiritual progress.

According to Lele, 'disengaged' ideals were more widespread than has been recognised and have been 'hiding in plain sight' in many Buddhist scriptures. This is more evident in Theravāda sources. For example, the Mahāpadāna Sutta relates how after seeing the 'four sights' the Buddha chose the path of renunciation in preference to the career of political leadership mapped out for him by his father. The Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta suggests that discussion of social issues is 'pointless talk' and advises 'Do not engage in the various kinds of pointless talk: that is, talk about kings, thieves, and ministers of state; talk about armies, dangers and wars . . . talk about relations, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries.' Such talk is pointless, it claims, 'Because, monks, this talk is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna' (SN V.420:1843). It might be pointed out that the Buddha is here addressing monks, and while such talk is pointless for them – since they have left the world – it may not be pointless for layfolk and especially those charged with the governance of society.

The Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta (Discourse on the Lion's Roar of the Cakkavatti) is another early text that is often read by engaged Buddhists as advocating social reform. This is because one section of the text relates how the failure of the king to support the needy led to a downward spiral of poverty and crime. The text as a whole, however, can be read as showing that however good or bad a society is it will inevitably change over time such that it is folly to expect any social system to provide happiness of an enduring kind to its citizens. The real message of this text, then, is not to encourage monks to be social reformers but to disengage from society and 'be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves,' seeking refuge only in the Dhamma (DN iii.77:404). Contrary to the engaged Buddhist reading of the text, which suggest that material well-being is a pre-requisite for spiritual development, later sections of the *sutta* show that the beings referred to raise themselves from bad material conditions through the exercise of virtue. Thus, as Lele, concludes, 'moral improvement is ultimately what makes the material conditions better' (Lele 2019, 264). Well-being thus does not depend in the end on social conditions, contrary to the understanding of Engaged Buddhism.

This 'disengaged' understanding of Buddhism is not new. Winston King noted that 'though Buddhism had important social repercussions, it was not basically or consciously a social reform movement aiming at the production of a certain type of society – save perhaps a society of believers, i.e.

monks, who were called upon to forsake the historical-political world and its concerns' (King 2001, 164). He added:

> To tell the truth the Buddha had little, either of concern for society as such or of firm conviction for its possible improvability. To be sure there was an existent society and it was not to be destroyed. And there would always be a society as long as there were human beings in some sort of universe. But its fluctuations, the rise and fall of its empires and social orders, its improvement and decay, its forms and names, represented for the Buddha only the stage on which each man plays his essentially solitary drama. Social conditions might help or hinder man in his progress towards Nibbāna to some extent, but they could never be *fundamentally* bettered. Social orders would revolve perpetually in meaningless cycles, all within the realm of kamma-rebirth (*saṃsāra*), but arrive nowhere in particular. Certain it was that there was no real salvation to be found in the socio-historical context or in the improvement of its forms. (King 2001, 164 original emphasis)

Any social improvement that came about, Disengaged Buddhism assumes, would result from the personal virtue of exemplary individuals radiating into the surrounding society. The implicit Buddhist strategy for producing a perfect society appears to be to perfect the individual citizens that compose it. The hope is that 'Such personal goodness in the leaders of the world, as well as in their followers, will solve all the complicated problems of international finance, economics, and politics' (King 2001, 195). This hypothesis, however, is nowhere critically examined or tested. As King expresses it:

> In passing we may observe that few Buddhist moralists have yet faced the basic questions raised by Reinhold Niebuhr in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: Does personal virtue carry directly over into social virtue? Are the two actually the same, in fact? Does individual 'progress' mean the same as social 'progress'? (King 2001, 168)

Apart from actively discouraging social reform, many texts see the institution of kingship as inherently inimical to spiritual development. This is a well-established theme in Buddhist literature. The idea is that by virtue of his office, which inevitably involves violence and punishment, the king necessarily incurs bad karma. The Mahāpadāna Sutta expresses the view

that accusation, punishment, and banishment are bad (*pāpaka*, *akusala*) (DN iii.93:413), and even though such practices are necessary for social order they hinder spiritual progress. Read in this way, these 'disengaged' sources provide evidence of a thoughtful and considered position rather than a failure of 'engagement'. Lele's thesis is that it is not correct to regard traditional Buddhism as 'underdeveloped' with respect to social and political issues. In fact, it has carefully considered the pros and cons of 'engagement' and decided against it.

> The implicit Buddhist strategy for producing a perfect society appears to be to perfect the individual citizens that compose it.

The preceding discussion brings us full circle to a question raised in Chapter 1 concerning the apparent absence of a discipline of ethics in Buddhism. Part of the answer, it was suggested, was the absence of an interest in socio-political questions which has been part of the concept of the 'good life' in the West from the time of Plato. We have just seen a suggestion that this may be explained by reference to Disengaged Buddhism. In other words, as has been suggested by Lele and others, there is not a vacuum or lacuna within the tradition in this respect. Buddhism is simply not interested in such questions and believes that involvement in such matters is a distraction from spiritual goals.

This also brings us back to the distinction between *kusala* and *puñña* discussed in Chapter 7. What in the end has fundamental value: virtue, or happiness? Disengaged Buddhism answers that it is virtue alone that has value. On this view, as Lele puts it, 'it is folly to seek the kinds of worldly goods that social activism can secure, rather than the more important goods of mental cultivation. It is also why one must avoid participation in the political action that is likely to increase the hatred (*dveṣa* or *dosa*) in our minds' (Lele 2019, 280). The fundamental question is whether virtue can be developed only by avoiding politics and turning instead to spiritual practices like meditation. Lele sums up as follows:

> *Is it the case* that the goods activism can provide are inherently unsatisfactory and therefore unworthy of our seeking, for ourselves and for others? If so, then social activism is indeed a worthless pastime, just as the disengaged Buddhists say it is, and the engaged Buddhists are sadly deluded, for they are leading themselves and others *away* from liberation. *Is it the*

case that political participation necessarily makes it impossible to attain the tranquility that has been held throughout the ages as a central Buddhist goal? If so, then Buddhists *should not* be politically engaged, and perhaps nobody should. (Lele 2019, 281f. original emphasis)

6 Buddhist Modernism

Buddhist 'modernists' form a sub-set of the Engaged Buddhist movement. They are united by the belief that the older Asian form of Buddhism has failed and see a need to create a new Buddhism for the West. This will be, as Segall describes it, 'in better accord with Western secular and scientific trends' (Segall 2020, 5). David McMahan describes these modernized forms of Buddhism as a 're-articulation' of Buddhism 'in the language of science and secular thought' (quoted in Segall 2020, 5).

'Buddhist modernism' is an umbrella term that includes a range of positions adopted by contemporary Buddhist groups which go by names like 'neo-Buddhism,' 'naturalized Buddhism,' and 'Secular Buddhism', and encompass a range of overlapping views and beliefs. Not all are concerned specifically with social activism, and what unites these groups is a desire to reconstruct traditional teachings so as to place a stronger emphasis on rationality, secularism, compatibility with modern science, individualism, and the exploitation of psychological techniques of self-enhancement and mental health (like meditation and mindfulness). A consequence of this orientation is that metaphysical beliefs are downplayed. Modernists reject ancient cosmologies, belief in gods and spirits, and the notion of rebirth. Karma is a principal casualty in this revisioning of Buddhist teachings. The website of the Secular Buddhist Association, for example, has this to say on the topic of 'Rebirth and the Supernatural':

> Secular Buddhists have a variety of ways of approaching teachings or text where they see mention of past lives, future lives, or rebirth in general. Some just ignore the passages and move on. Some of us choose to look at the topic as a metaphor for the many ways the feeling of self and ego arise, the rebirth of greed, hatred, etc. And some feel that either these passages about literal rebirth were added to the Pali canon at a later time, or that the writers misunderstood or mistranslated the teachings, or that Buddha was victim to the times he was born in, or that he put a lot of weight in meditation experience. Some even feel

rebirth is contradictory to the teachings. The point is, you don't have to believe in literal rebirth to benefit from these amazing teachings.[1]

In accordance with the above, the problem of suffering is reinterpreted as applying specifically to suffering in this life, and a sceptical or agnostic position is adopted concerning other realms and past and future lives. As we will see below, some modernists also favour Western theories of ethics since these do not involve metaphysical presuppositions that are incompatible with natural science (Segall 2020). Those ethical teachings that can be divorced from karma, however, are retained and in many respects the break with tradition is less marked. Thus, modernists continue to respect the Five Precepts and to practice traditional virtues like non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*).

> **Buddhist modernism** seeks to reconstruct traditional teachings so as to place a stronger emphasis on rationality, secularism, compatibility with modern science, individualism, and the exploitation of psychological techniques of self-enhancement and mental health.

Stephen Batchelor is a member of the advisory board of the Secular Buddhist Association and a leading exponent of Buddhist modernism. He was formerly a monk in the Zen and Tibetan traditions. His books *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (Batchelor 1998) and *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (Batchelor 2011) give a good introduction to Buddhist modernism and explain why, in his view, a new secularised form of Buddhism – which he calls 'Buddhism 2.0' – is required for modern times. For a general review of such positions *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by David McMahan (McMahan 2008) is recommended.

There is evidence that modernist trends are accelerating and taking a 'postmodern turn.' In this development, selective features of the traditional and modern are intertwined in a blend of scientific, psychological, and traditional Buddhist discourses. Issues of race, gender, and inclusion are raised as a challenge to some of the universalist and egalitarian assumptions of Buddhist modernism. As portrayed by Ann Gleig in *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (Gleig 2019) the earlier modernist picture of Buddhism as a unified tradition and an independent world religion is

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[1] https://secularbuddhism.org/starting-out/

increasingly fragmenting into a kaleidoscope of diverse groups, identities, and intersectional affiliations.

> There is evidence that Buddhist modernism is taking a 'postmodern turn' blending selected features of the traditional and modern in a new discourse incorporating issues of race, gender, intersectionality, and social inclusion, that critiques some of the universalist and egalitarian assumptions of Buddhist modernism.

A Critique of Modernism

Contemporary developments like Engaged Buddhism and Buddhist Modernism are not without their critics. David Chapman, writing in his *Vividness* blog,[2] subsumes engaged and modernist developments under the term 'Consensus Buddhism.' He sees 'Consensus Buddhism' as a conspiracy on the part of American Buddhist teachers to influence the development of Western Buddhism. This project, he suggests, took shape at a series of Western Buddhist Teachers Conferences organised by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield and Lama Surya Das. The objective of this project was to forge agreement on a supposedly new and unified form of Buddhism – what Goldstein terms 'One Dharma' – that was said to be evolving in the West.

'One Dharma' takes elements from various traditions and blends them together into a supposedly unified body of teachings. The various historical Buddhist traditions are depicted as isolated streams that are now for the first time flowing into a single ocean. Chapman suggests that a group of Western teachers first reached a 'consensus' as to the essential features of this construct and then taught it to their followers as a new interpretation of Buddhism for the modern world. He describes this new version of Buddhism as having:

> ... about a million faithful in the fold, and thousands of teachers. Some have a background in Theravada, some in Zen, some in Tibetan Buddhism, but they are all teaching much the same stuff. Consensus Buddhism has its house presses (*Tricycle*, the *Shambhala Sun*, the major non-academic Buddhist book publishers); a powerful political establishment, extensive training programs, centers, and all the other apparatus of a major religion.[3]

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[2] https://vividness.live/
[3] https://vividness.live/one-dharma-whose

7 Modernist Eudaimonism

In Chapter 9 we considered similarities between eudaimonism and the Buddhist conception of nirvanic well-being. An attempt to blend the two in a new concept of 'eudaimonic enlightenment' has been made by Seth Segall, a retired American clinical psychologist, long-time Buddhist practitioner, and Zen Priest. He describes his book *Buddhism and Human Flourishing* as follows:

> In its broadest sense, this book is about the tension between Buddhist and Western conceptions of what it means to live the best possible kind of life one can aspire to. It's a book about what aspects of traditional Buddhist teachings are possible for us, as modern Westerners, to truly accept and make good use of, and what aspects conflict so deeply with our cultural heritage that genuine belief becomes impossible. (Segall 2020, 1)

The 'tension' referred to arises from cultural differences that present a challenge to the Western appropriation of Buddhism in its traditional form. Segall observes:

> The modern Western ecosystem of meanings presents several significant barriers to the unmodified assimilation of traditional Buddhist teachings. Chief among these are Western beliefs concerning life after death, Western scientific naturalism and materialism, and the Aristotelian ideal of human flourishing—Westerners' implicit understanding of what it means to live the best possible kind of life a human being can aspire to. (Segall 2020, 6)

Segall is attracted to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia because it offers a quintessentially Western understanding of well-being. In large part this is because while recognising the importance of virtue, Aristotle's eudaimonism also acknowledges the importance of 'being an active participant in the civic life of one's community' (Segall 2020, 11). Aristotle believed that man was a 'political animal' who could only flourish within a social order, and it is this participation in civic life that marks, for Segall, a crucial point of contrast with 'disengaged' Buddhist concepts of well-being. He sees this difference as more profound than disagreements over traditional beliefs like karma and rebirth, or other philosophical and metaphysical disagreements.

> Segall is attracted to Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia because it requires participation in civic life, has a more modest conception of well-being, and is compatible with science.

In his Preface, Segall speaks of 'tensions between traditional Buddhist understandings of enlightenment and prevailing Western notions of human flourishing' (Segall 2020, vii). These tensions arise because 'the traditional endpoint of Buddhist practice—variously called 'enlightenment,' 'awakening,' or 'nirvāṇa'— is dissonant with modern Westerners' implicit understanding of what it means to live the best possible kind of life' (Segall 2020, 11). Segall finds it hard to accept the traditional idea that any form of well-being can be 'supreme and perfect' or even permanent in the way nirvana is described in traditional sources. He prefers to think of nirvana as 'a never quite reached horizon' and 'a never-ending process' (Segall 2020, 28).

In this respect, Segall believes Aristotle's eudaimonia provides a more modest concept of well-being than nirvana, such that 'Eudaimonic man is not perfectly and perpetually happy; he doesn't live in a state of unalloyed bliss . . . . But, under ordinary circumstances, he is content, never utterly miserable, imperturbable, and wise and skillful in his actions' (Segall 2020, 36). Segall explains further:

> According to Aristotle . . . eudaimonic people are happy, virtuous, and wise, but just people, nonetheless. They enjoy the pleasures of life, but in moderation. They're generous to others, but not to excess. They are like us, only better. Enlightened beings, on the other hand, seem trans-human. They have transcended human frailties, acquired transcendent knowledge and powers, and attained unshakeable perfection. (Segall 2020, 39)

The eudaimonic standard is thus a more 'realistic' conception of well-being than the nirvanic one, at least to the Western mind. What, then, is the specifically Buddhist contribution to this conception of well-being? Segall indicates that this would include ideas of non-self, emptiness, and non-duality, and the inclusion of Buddhist virtues such as the Six Perfections (*pārāmitas*) and *Brahma-vihāras* along with Aristotelian ones like practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and justice (Segall 2020, 65f.). This would lead to a hybrid model of 'eudaimonic enlightment' distinguished by the following ten features (Segall 2020, 67):

1. The gradual development of discerning wisdom and skillful behavior regarding desire and aversion.

2. A gradual movement toward non-attachment to thoughts, that is, re-garding thoughts as 'mere' thoughts and not habitually assuming their truth-value.

3. Increasing skillfulness regarding desires and thoughts leading to in-creasing inner stability and equanimity.

4. An increasing ability to give stable attention to the immediacy of moment-to-moment embodied experiencing.

5. An increasing ability to accept that things-are-as-they-are. Acceptance signifies neither approval nor passivity, but simply recognition.

6. A growing recognition that our ideas concerning 'self' are not co-extensive with our fullness of being as organisms-in-process-with-the-universe.

7. An increasing recognition that all things exist by virtue of their pro-found interconnection with everything else, both at an experiential and at a conceptual level.

8. A gradual movement—punctuated by sudden realizations—of the non-dual nature of reality underlying appearances.

9. The translation of one's realization of emptiness/non-duality into spontaneous loving-kindness and compassionate responsiveness.

10. The promotion of individual and collective flourishing through civic engagement.

The *telos* or endpoint of this model is 'a superior level of well-being within a single lifetime.' As envisaged by Aristotle, it would be 'neither perfect nor permanent, but realistically reflect what we as human beings are actually capable of given sufficient time, diligence, effort, and practice' (Segall 2020, 68). Enlightenment would thus be 'a horizon rather than a destination' with the added feature that 'No-one ever completes the journey' (Segall 2020, 68).

> 'Something very much like the eudaimonic enlighten-ment model is becoming the dominant Western model, if it has not already done so.'
> - *Seth Segall*

This ideal of well-being does not make unrealistic ethical demands. It places limits on compassion such that there is no need to imitate Vessantara and give away one's children or sacrifice oneself to a hungry tigress. The

'universal compassion' of the kind proclaimed in Mahāyāna sources, by contrast, represents 'a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature' (Segall 2020, 161). Thus, says Segall, it is unnatural to suggest that we should care more for the children of others than our own. The moral demands of eudaimonic enlightenment, as noted, are more modest: while we should never harm others, there is no requirement to place them on the same level as our own family and friends. This form of eudaimonism would therefore be 'agent-relative', as discussed in Chapter 9. Segall believes it provides 'a rationale for ethical behavior that is compatible with modernity and adds something to ethics above and beyond the Golden Rule' (Segall 2020, 163).

It bears pointing out that this more modest concept of happiness resembles the immanent, 'life affirming' attitude displayed in the earliest Buddhist sources like the Aṭṭhakavagga we mentioned when discussing the 'Nirodha view' in the last chapter. The nature of eudaimonic enlightenment does not seem very far removed from what Horner and other scholars have depicted as the earliest Buddhist conception of well-being. It is certainly closer than the 'life denying' attitude of later sources that emphasise karmic rebirth and suffering.

In conclusion, Segall believes that the eudaimonic enlightenment model 'unites what is best from both Asian and Western traditions' (Segall 2020, 110). He believes it redefines well-being in a form that is more appropriate for the contemporary Western convert Buddhist, and concludes 'I am also confident that something very much like the eudaimonic enlightenment model is becoming the dominant Western model, if it has not already done so' (Segall 2020, 70).

8 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Engaged Buddhism emerged as a distinct movement in the 1960s and following decades. It focuses on questions of public policy such as social justice, human rights, poverty, politics, violence, and the environment.
- Influential Asian patrons of the movement include Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Maha Ghosananda.
- Important Engaged Buddhist organisations include the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi, Buddhist Global Relief, the Zen Peacemaker Order, and the Buddhist Action Coalition.
- Opinion is divided on to what extent Engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism, forged by modernity in response to contemporary concerns, and to what extent it exhibits continuity with traditional Buddhism.
- Amod Lele has suggested that traditional Buddhism was consciously 'disengaged' and saw involvement in politics as harmful to spiritual practice.
- Buddhist 'modernism' has its origins in the work of nineteenth-century Asian Buddhists like Anagārika Dharmapāla who constructed supposedly more rational versions of Buddhism as a response to Western colonialism, imperialism, and proselytizing.
- Buddhist modernism goes by a variety of names like 'neo-Buddhism,' 'naturalized Buddhism,' and 'Secular Buddhism'. Common features include an emphasis on rationality, secularism, compatibility with modern science, individualism, and the exploitation of psychological techniques of self-enhancement and mental health (like meditation and mindfulness).
- Drawing on Aristotle, Segall has proposed an 'eudaimonic enlightenment' model of well-being which he believes unites what is best from both Asian and Western traditions. He believes this defines nirvanic well-being in a form that is more appropriate for the contemporary Western convert Buddhist.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define 'Engaged Buddhism'? How does it differ from 'Buddhist ethics'?
2. Is Engaged Buddhism primarily an Asian or Western development?
3. Is traditional Buddhism 'engaged' or 'disengaged'?
4. Is engagement harmful to spiritual progress?
5. What is distinctive about 'Buddhist modernism'? Is it genuine Buddhism?
6. How does 'eudaimonic enlightenment' differ from the traditional conception of nirvana?

Further Reading

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12 Human Rights

1 In this Chapter

As we saw in the last chapter, Engaged Buddhists typically voice strong support for human rights, but not everyone is persuaded that Western concepts like 'rights' are compatible with Buddhist teachings. While globalization has weakened claims that 'Asian values' are radically distinctive, the suspicion lingers that human rights are a Trojan horse for hegemonic Western values. Fears are also expressed that the individualism implicit in 'rights' promotes egocentricity and conflict rather than selflessness and social cohesion. Here we first explore the conceptual compatibility of human rights with Buddhist teachings, before considering some proposed doctrinal foundations. The chapter concludes by suggesting how these different proposals might be grounded in a common Buddhist teaching.

The importance of human rights for Buddhism is evident from the attention the subject has received in recent decades. Leading Engaged Buddhists from many Asian countries, such as the Dalai Lama (Tibet), A. T. Ariyaratne (Sri Lanka), Maha Ghosananda (Cambodia), and Sulak Sivaraksa (Thailand), have expressed their concerns about social and political issues on numerous occasions using the language of human rights. Institutions have been established by Buddhists to defend and promote human rights. These include the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, and the Thai National Human Rights Commission. Several Asian countries with large Buddhist populations (Thailand, Myanmar, Lao, Cambodia, and Vietnam) are also members of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) founded in 2009.

The human rights record of Buddhism itself, however, is not unblemished. Human rights abuses were recorded on both sides in the Sri Lankan civil war, and although hostilities ceased in 2009, harassment, intimidation, torture,

exploitation, and violence by Buddhists have continued, including attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities.[1] In Myanmar, Buddhist factions have mounted pogroms against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, and in Japan and China, Buddhism has colluded with state institutions of repression and control (Shiotsu and Gebert 1999; Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer 2010, 123). One of the most prominent Buddhist campaigners for human rights, the current Dalai Lama, has himself been charged with denying religious freedom in the so-called 'Shugden controversy' (Mills 2003). Buddhism has also been accused of failing to protect the rights of women (Tsedroen 2010; Suwanna Satha-Anand 1999).

Documenting the Buddhist record on human rights, however, is not our main concern, and our focus instead will be on the concept of human rights and its relation to Buddhist doctrine and ethics. Discussions of this kind often begin by describing a paradox, which philosopher Christopher Gowans formulates in the following terms: 'It is widely acknowledged that human rights were not explicitly recognized or endorsed in traditional Buddhist texts . . . And yet human rights are endorsed and advocated by most (although not all) engaged Buddhists today' (Gowans 2015, 245). Taking this paradox as our starting point, our task is to survey the intellectual bridgework which must be put in place if human rights are to be given an authentic grounding in Buddhist doctrine. An important first step is to ask if the concept of 'rights' is intelligible in Buddhism, and, if so, whether appeals to human rights are consistent with Buddhist values. This will be the concern of the first part of the chapter. The second will review possible foundations for human rights in Buddhist teachings.

2 Rights, Human Rights, and Buddhist Ethics

The intellectual history of human rights is complex and cannot be explored here in any depth (see Ishay 2008; Donnelly 2013). We may simply note that the antecedents of today's human rights were spoken of as 'natural' rights, in other words, rights which flow from human nature. From the seventeenth century onwards, philosophers and statesmen began to define these rights and enshrine them in constitutions, declarations, charters, and manifestos in a tradition which has continued into modern times. The most well-known modern charter of human rights is *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948. Human rights thinking has continued to evolve since

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[1]http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=16539&LangID=E

the publication of this document, and further covenants and declarations have followed. Two in particular are important, namely the *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*, and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Both were approved by the United Nations in 1966 and came into force a decade later. These three documents are often referred to collectively as the 'International Bill of Human Rights'.

> The most well-known modern charter of human rights is *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948.

Subsequent instruments have been enacted to address specific problems such as discrimination (for example, on grounds of race and gender) and to uphold the rights of particular groups (such as children, migrant workers, the disabled, and indigenous peoples). These various 'generations' of human rights initiatives (Montgomery 1986, 69f) collectively secure a broad range of rights and freedoms, which while difficult to classify neatly may be thought of as falling into five main areas (Glendon 2001, 174): i) rights of the person (e.g. life, liberty, and freedom of religion); ii) rights before the law (e.g. equality before the law and the right to a fair trial); iii) political rights (e.g. freedom of assembly and the right to vote); iv) economic and social rights (e.g. social security and employment rights); and v) the rights of communities and groups (e.g. protection against genocide, and the rights of children). The Human Rights Council, a 47-member body inaugurated in 2006 with its headquarters in Geneva, is charged, under the supervision of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with reviewing the compliance of member states with their human rights obligations.

Foundations

The nature, scope, and foundations of the rights just described are contested, but the main philosophical approaches may be identified briefly. *Naturalists* hold that human rights are an expansion of the 'natural rights' said to be enjoyed by human beings 'as such' or 'simply in view of their humanity'. Naturalists identify 'objective foundations for human rights in morality and reason' (Freeman 1994, 512). On one version of this view, that of the pre-modern natural law tradition, rights are rationally required for the promotion of the 'common good' (the flourishing of individuals and their communities). Naturalist conceptions have been termed *foundationalist* since, as noted, they

understand human rights as the expression of an underlying and independent order of moral values, in some sense innate in human nature. Such an understanding is consistent with a 'nature-fulfilment' theory of well-being of the kind we discussed in Chapter 3.

Anti-foundationalists by contrast, support the aims of human rights but deny that any objective foundation for them exists. Instead, they seek to justify respect for human rights on a contextual basis emphasizing 'contingency, construction, and relativity' (Freeman 1994, 511) and attach particular importance to the role of the sentiments. *Sceptics*, for their part, attack belief in human rights in various ways. Some dismiss them as mere fictions like 'witches' and 'unicorns' (MacIntyre 1981, 69), while others claim they are vacuous on the grounds there is no agency or mechanism directly responsible for their enforcement. Sceptics who are *relativists* deny that human rights can be universal given the empirical diversity of cultures and moral values.

> **Foundationalism** understands human rights as the expression of an underlying and independent order of moral values. **Anti-foundationalism** denies any objective foundation for rights can be found.

Perhaps understandably in the face of these conflicting opinions, *agreement conceptions* of human rights have become popular. Here, diversity is acknowledged, and philosophical differences bracketed in order to reach agreement on 'a set of important overlapping moral expectations to which different cultures hold themselves and other accountable' (Twiss 1998, 31). We will meet examples of some of these positions in the second half of the chapter, but for now we consider what attitude Buddhism should adopt towards human rights and the institutions which seek to promote them as international norms. Some counsel caution and raise objections of two kinds – cultural and conceptual – to Buddhism becoming too closely associated with the human rights movement.

Cultural Objections

An initial objection concerns the alien cultural and historical origins of human rights. It cannot be denied, as Peter Junger notes, that the concept of 'human rights' is 'a product of the traditions of Western Europe and the parochial histories of that region' (Junger 1998, 56). As Sobisch and Brox observe, much scepticism towards documents such as the UDHR 'stems from the assumption that universalism equals imperialism, in the sense that

societies are forced to conform to ethnocentric ideas, disregarding or even denying cultural differences' (Sobisch and Brox 2010, 161).

> Some Asian states have criticised the idea of human rights because of its Western origins and because it promotes individualism in contrast to 'Asian values' that are seen as more community-oriented.

In the 1990s, the political leaders of a number of Asian states (notably Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, with strong backing from China) began to criticize the idea of human rights on grounds of its Western intellectual genealogy (Langlois 2001). According to them talk of human rights promotes individualism in contrast to 'Asian values' which are said to be more community-oriented (Narayan 1993). It was also claimed that human rights are a luxury that less developed countries cannot afford, and that economic development should remain the priority.

In some cases, it was hard not to see this 'cultural critique' (Amartya Sen's term) as a smokescreen to conceal the poor human rights record of certain Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Sen has challenged the view that there is anything specifically 'Asian' about such values (Sen 1997), and the Dalai Lama has also repudiated the view that human rights 'cannot be applied to Asia and other parts of the Third World because of differences in culture and differences in social and economic development' (Keown et al 1998, xviii).

As human rights evolved in the final decades of the twentieth century, moreover, cultural pluralism has been increasingly recognized and incorporated into transnational human rights thinking. Clapham notes how human rights have been claimed 'in the contexts of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, anti-slavery, anti-apartheid, anti-racism, and feminist and indigenous struggles everywhere', observing that in many cases 'the chanting on the ground' did not 'sing to the West's tune' (Clapham 2007, 19). Sobisch and Brox point out that 'the globalization of a discourse on human rights does not simply equal Westernization' because 'traveling ideas like human rights are not unequivocally constructed, translated and manifested: there is always room for interpretation' (Sobisch and Brox 2010, 161).

Simon Caney (Caney 2001) offers Theravāda Buddhism as an example of how non-Western ethical traditions can embrace human rights, while Harding comments with respect to Thailand, 'I see no reason to deny the validity of attempts by the state to explain human rights in Buddhist terms' (Harding 2007, 20). As Schmidt-Leukel points out, however, there remains

the question of the appropriate balance between 'Asian values' and 'Western Liberalism' (Schmidt-Leukel 2010, 59). Too much emphasis on collectivism can stunt the development of individuality, whereas a one-sided stress on individual rights may fail to nurture a sense of community and social responsibility. Clearly, a 'middle way' is desirable.

Conceptual Objections

In modern times the vocabulary of rights has become the *lingua franca* of political and ethical discourse. In contrast to the ubiquitous references to rights in today's globalized world, however, there appears to be no term in any canonical Buddhist language which conveys the idea of a right understood as a subjective entitlement. Masao Abe writes 'the exact equivalent of the phrase "human rights" in the Western sense cannot be found anywhere in Buddhist literature' (quoted in Traer 1995, 9 n.11).

The absence of a specific reference to rights need not mean, however, that Buddhism *opposes* the idea. Sometimes the same conceptual ground can be covered semantically in different ways, for example by using a locution like 'ought' or 'due' to express what is owed between parties. Alan Gewirth has argued that 'persons might have and use the concept of a right without explicitly having a single word for it' (quoted in Dagger 1989, 286). Andrew Clapham suggests that 'Religious texts like the Bible and the Koran can be read as creating not only duties but rights', and believes that concerns with regard to 'self-fulfilment, respect for others, and the quest to contribute to others' well-being' are evident in Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions' (Clapham 2007, 5).

> In modern times the vocabulary of rights has become the *lingua franca* of political and ethical discourse. However, there appears to be no term in any canonical Buddhist language which conveys the idea of a right understood as a subjective entitlement.

It seems clear, at least, that Buddhism acknowledges the existence of reciprocal *duties*. With respect to social justice the Rev. Vajiragnana comments:

> Each one of us has a role to play in sustaining and promoting social justice and orderliness. The Buddha explained very clearly these roles as reciprocal duties existing between parents and children; teachers and pupils; husband and wife; friends,

relatives and neighbors; employer and employee; clergy and laity ... No one has been left out. The duties explained here are reciprocal and are considered as sacred duties, for – if observed – they can create a just, peaceful and harmonious society. (Vajiragnana 1992)

The author apparently has in mind the Sigalovāda Sutta (DN 31) in which the Buddha describes a set of six reciprocal social duties in a manner reminiscent of Confucius's Five Great Relationships (King 2001, 185f). It does not seem unreasonable when analysing these relationships from the beneficiary's perspective to employ the vocabulary of rights. Thus, parents have duties to their children, and children have a right to support, nurture, education, and protection from their parents. On this basis the distinction between rights and duties amounts to little more than a heuristic shift of perspective. As Hesanmi notes, 'Rather than erecting a false dichotomy between "rights" and "duty" what seems more reasonable is to affirm their correlativeness and mutual entailment' (Hesanmi 2008, 504). Paul Lauren recalls Gandhi's observation that 'The true source of rights is duty', adding that 'ideas about human duties, or what one is due to do, led quite naturally to ideas about human rights, or what is due to one' (Lauren 2011, 11). On this basis it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that despite the limitations of the classical Buddhist lexicon rights can be accommodated in Buddhist teachings.

The philosophical and jurisprudential dimensions of rights are complex, and there is no need to pursue these topics at greater length. Our objective has been more limited, namely, to suggest that a conceptual space for rights can plausibly be located in Buddhist teachings. This is necessary to avoid premature foreclosure of the discussion on the grounds that Buddhism cannot meaningfully participate in contemporary human rights discourse other, perhaps, than in some derivative way by regarding rights as a 'skilful means'. Even if a conceptual foundation exists, however, it does not follow that the adoption and promotion of the concept of rights is innately desirable. Indeed, in the view of some commentators, the very idea of rights is in conflict both with Buddhism's metaphysics and soteriology.

Metaphysics

Concern arises here in relation to the doctrine of 'no-self' (*anātman*). If there is ultimately no self, the argument goes, then who, or what, is the bearer of the rights in question? Christopher Kelley describes this as 'the paradox

of the inherent dignity of empty persons' (Kelley 2015, 3). Human rights naturalists, as we saw earlier, seek to ground human dignity in some notion of an *a priori* human nature, but Kelley suggests such notions presuppose belief in inherent existence and hence are 'essentially incompatible with the most fundamental idea in Buddhism – the theory of no-self' (Kelley 2015, 13).

Sallie King, however, describes objections of this kind as a 'red herring' (King 2005, 128), pointing out that Buddhist ethics functions perfectly well in many contexts without assuming the existence of a permanent self. The doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) involves only the denial of a transcendental self, not of a phenomenal, empirical self. It does not deny the existence of individuals with unique self-shaped identities, and if such identities provide an ontological foundation stable enough for the attribution of duties, as the Buddha clearly believed, presumably they also do for rights.

> Concern arises in relation to the doctrine of 'no-self' (*anātman*). If there is ultimately no self, who, or what, is the bearer of the rights in question?

As Lauren Leve points out in the context of Buddhism in Nepal, the doctrine of no-self does not seem to inhibit Buddhists who claim the *protection* of human rights charters. She notes 'when Buddhists insist that national Hinduism violates their human rights to religious equality, they represent themselves as particular types of persons and political subjects' (Leve 2007, 98). She mentions the example of a senior Theravāda meditation teacher, noting that 'neither he nor his many students seemed to have any problem combining an anti-essentialist understanding of the self with the call for secular human rights and its implied identity' (Leve 2007, 105). Buddhist nationalists in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Tibet, furthermore, rely on an ethnicized Buddhist religious identity as the basis of their political demands. It would thus appear that many Buddhists do not see the no-self doctrine as incompatible with ontologies of agency and identity. We will return to this topic later when we consider specific anti-foundationalist proposals.

Soteriology

The soteriological objection claims that the individualism implicit in rights is detrimental to both spiritual progress and social stability because it strengthens the ego and encourages selfish attitudes. Payutto observes that Western

notions of rights involve 'competition, mistrust and fear'. Human rights, he notes, 'must be obtained through demand' (quoted in Seeger 2010, 82f). Saneh Chamarik, one-time chair of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, echoes Payutto's concerns when he states 'what really obstructs the attainment of freedom is not so much the social and conventional "chains" or restrictions, as one's own ego and the three poisons: lust, hatred, and delusion' (quoted in Seeger 2010, 91). In response, it might be pointed out that injustice, repression, and discrimination also give rise to negative states of mind, and that by enabling recourse to justice human rights provide a way of dispelling these mental defilements and removing the conditions that give rise to them.

> Thai monk Prayudh Payutto has claimed that Western notions of rights involve 'competition, mistrust and fear'. The Dalai Lama, however, believes 'It is natural and just for nations, peoples, and individuals to demand respect for their rights and freedoms.'

Some critics suggest that the threat to society posed by the clamour for individual rights must be opposed through strong social control. The Thai Buddhist reformer Bhikkhu Buddhadāsa expressed the view that the individual must be firmly subordinated to the state and called for 'A Dictatorial Dhammic Socialism' in an article of the same title (Buddhadasa 1989). As Schmidt-Leukel notes, it is hard not to see the influence of Asian communism (perhaps linked to the notion of the authoritarian Dhammarāja) in the background to views of this kind (Schmidt-Leukel 2010, 61). Fears that rights inevitably lead to social instability seem exaggerated, although it must be admitted that demands for increased rights may provoke an adversarial reaction from vested interests.

Specific fears also attach to the ownership of property, a right enshrined in article 17 of the UDHR. Some see this as authorizing consumerism and the selfish accumulation of wealth. Against this, there is nothing in Buddhist teachings to prohibit the ownership of property (the second precept against stealing seems to presuppose it), and the *saṅgha* has traditionally depended on the generosity of lay patrons. Views expressed by the Dalai Lama form a striking contrast to those of Buddhadāsa. He has stated 'It is natural and just for nations, peoples, and individuals to demand respect for their rights and freedoms and to struggle to end repression, racism, economic exploitation, military occupation, and various forms of colonialism and alien domination' (quoted in King 2005, 156).

While it is true that rights are sometimes claimed for selfish reasons, they can also protect common interests. The right to freedom of association (UDHR article 20.i), for example, is hardly individualistic, and as King points out, when the Dalai Lama calls for respect for human rights, such as freedom of religion, he often does so in the name of the people of Tibet (King 2005, 136). Collective rights are also claimed by communities themselves. In 2005, villagers in Myanmar relied on human rights conventions against enforced slavery to win a settlement against the Unocal company. The settlement was used in part to develop programmes to improve living conditions and provide health care and education for the affected communities (Clapham 2007, 27f). Later generations of human rights, such as those proclaimed in *The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) are by nature difficult to classify as 'individualistic'.

3 Buddhist Foundations for Human Rights

Contrasting with the critiques considered so far are more affirmative approaches of the kind to be considered below. The more ambitious of these claim that human rights doctrines are completely foreshadowed in Buddhist teachings, while others emphasize particular doctrines as possible bridgeheads between the Dharma and human rights.

Agreement Conceptions

Human rights declarations rarely offer a detailed justification for the rights they proclaim. This leaves scope, as Sumner Twiss has observed, for a range of theoretical underpinnings (Twiss 1998). Charles Taylor has spoken of an 'unforced consensus' on human rights suggesting there are different paths to human rights norms (Taylor 1999), and others have made reference to 'structural equivalents' or 'multiple foundations' which allow consensus to be reached in the face of pluralist cultural and philosophical perspectives (Donnelly 2013). Drawing on the Thai experience, Andrew Harding endorses this approach, observing that in a 'postmodern, multi-culturalist world of international human rights', '*we do better to try to agree on the content of human rights rather than on the justification for their observance*' (Harding 2007, 21 original emphasis).

> **Agreement conceptions** of human rights allow consensus to be reached in the face of cultural and philosophical differences. However, they give up any claim to be foundationalist and to ground human rights in universal moral values.

The UDHR was an agreement of this kind and sought to express common aspirations through the medium of Enlightenment values without at the same time professing theological or philosophical unanimity. As Jacques Maritain famously reported, it was an agreement about rights '*on condition that no-one asks us why*' (quoted in Beitz 2009, 21 original emphasis). In this sense declarations like the UDHR, given their wide and ambitious scope, can be seen as political manifestos or gestures of social responsibility on the part of world governments. The 'manifesto rights' (Feinberg 1973, 67) they proclaim, accordingly, do not create legal entitlements. Understood in this way, the objections mentioned previously to Buddhism endorsing 'rights' lose much of their force: the question becomes simply whether Buddhism can in good conscience sign up to the values enshrined in the proposed manifesto.

The main attraction of agreement conceptions is that they acknowledge moral diversity and avoid the charge of paternalism. The main drawback is that they give up any claim to ground human rights in universal moral values (Beitz 2009, ch.4; Schaefer 2005, 48–50). A problem here is that a consensus that circumvents deep philosophical differences may be superficial, and any agreement that can command universal assent is likely to be 'minimalist' and 'thin' (Ignatieff et al. 2003, 56). As James Nickel notes, it is doubtful whether 'there is sufficient agreement worldwide to support anything like the full range of rights declared in contemporary manifestos' (quoted in Freeman 1994, 493). Some Buddhists, moreover, may find it difficult to participate in a consensus which specifies rights as axioms (as opposed to conclusions from moral premises) without compromising traditional beliefs. They may point out, for example, that when the mythical universal ruler (*Cakkavatti*) spreads the Dhamma to the four quarters of the globe he does so not by first negotiating with local rulers as to which aspects of the Dhamma are acceptable and compromising on those that are not. Rather, the local rulers accept the Dhamma in its entirety because they recognize its validity as a universal norm (DN iii.62:397).

Perera's Three Foundations

One commentator finds the UDHR, at least, in harmony with early Buddhist teachings both in letter and in spirit. Professor Perera, a Sri Lankan scholar, has helpfully provided a commentary on each of the thirty articles of the UDHR aiming to demonstrate as much. In his Foreword to the commentary Ananda Gurugé writes: 'Professor Perera demonstrates that every single Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – even the labour rights to fair wages, leisure and welfare – has been adumbrated, cogently upheld and meaningfully incorporated in an overall view of life and society by the Buddha' (Perera 1991, xi).

Perera makes three suggestions as to possible foundations for human rights. The first is the 'fundamental consideration that all life has a desire to safeguard itself and to make itself comfortable and happy' (Perera 1991, 29). Basing rights on supposedly universal facts about human nature, however, raises difficult questions of philosophical anthropology, and the empirical evidence often yields inconvenient counterexamples (such as self-destructive individuals who seem to care little about their fate). The goal of being 'comfortable and happy' is also too vague to serve as a moral criterion: human traffickers may aspire to be 'comfortable and happy' by systematically abusing human rights. Finally, desire seems a questionable foundation for rights given its generally negative portrayal in Buddhist teachings.

> Perera has suggested that the UDHR is foreshadowed in early Buddhist teachings and there is complete agreement between the two in letter and spirit.

Perera's second suggestion makes a connection to human dignity. He writes: 'Buddhism posits, as Jean Jacques Rousseau did much later, that the essence of human dignity lies in the assumption of man's responsibility for his own governance' (Perera 1991, 28). Again, it is unlikely that Buddhism would wish to link human dignity quite so closely to politics. While political institutions may well be created through the exercise of distinctively human capacities, it is unlikely that Buddhism would locate 'the essence of human dignity' in their creation. According to the Aggaññasutta (DN 27), the evolution of political societies is the consequence of depravity and decline, which makes them a dubious testament to human dignity.

As his final suggestion, in his commentary on Article 1.52 of the UDHR ('All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'), Perera identifies a more promising foundation for human rights. In discussing the first sentence of the Article he comments that 'Buddhahood itself is within

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the reach of all human beings ... and if all could attain Buddhahood what greater equality in dignity and rights can there be?' He expands on this in a remark toward the end of his commentary on Article 1: 'It is from the point of view of its goal that Buddhism evaluates all action. Hence Buddhist thought is in accord with this and other Articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the extent to which they facilitate the advancement of human beings toward the Buddhist goal' (Perera 1991, 24). The connection made here between Buddhahood, human dignity, and human rights, is also affirmed by others, as we shall see below.

Buddhist Precepts

Several commentators, including the present author (Keown 1998), have suggested that the Buddhist precepts, especially those which prohibit causing harm to others, provide a foundation for human rights on the basis of the reciprocal understanding of rights and duties discussed previously. Thus, when the precepts are broken, someone's rights are infringed. Somparn Promta (Promta 1994) has argued that the Five Precepts protect human rights, and as such the First Precept can be seen as an expression of the right to life (or more specifically the right not to be killed unjustly). In the same way Micheline Ishay notes 'With the exception of adultery, the gist of these injunctions is reflected in the very first clauses of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which praise the spirit of brotherhood and the right to life, liberty, and the security of one's person' (Ishay 2008, 30). Sallie King reports that senior Cambodian monks have expressed the view that human rights are 'the same as *sel pram* [the Five Lay Precepts]' (King 2005, 139). King herself has observed how:

> [T]he precepts imply that that society will be Good in which its members do not harm each other, steal from each other, lie to each other, etc. This in turn implies that a member of a Good society should have a reasonable expectation not to be harmed, stolen from, etc. Now one may or may not want to call such a thing a 'right', but it is certainly closing in on that ground in a practical sense, if not in the full conceptual sense (King 2005, 144).

Most societies have rules protecting human life, prohibiting theft and lying, and governing sexual relationships. Michael Walzer characterizes such negative duties as the 'moral minimum' (Walzer 1994, 9f). It should

come as no surprise, therefore, that Buddhist precepts coincide with the core concerns of human rights charters.

> Human rights may be implicit in the Five Precepts because duties normally entail rights, and the negative duties imposed by the precepts entail corresponding rights on the part of the community, such as a right not to be harmed.

Sevilla raises a problem here concerning the motivation for keeping the precepts: if it is to accumulate good karma, does this not amount to egoism rather than a concern for the rights of others? If so, he asks rhetorically, 'why must I respect another's rights for his or her sake?' (Sevilla 2010, 223). His answer is that the rights of others must be respected because compassion requires it, but this answer only pushes the problem back, for a person may have egotistical motives for performing compassionate acts (such as to obtain the karmic reward).

An alternative is to point out that in respecting the precepts one promotes the good of both self and others and so acts for the benefit of society at large. This seems to coincide more closely with the goal of human rights. In fact, Sevilla provides an answer of a similar kind when he writes 'we must participate in the realization of the Buddha-nature possessed not only by ourselves but shared with others, by upholding the rights of others' (Sevilla 2010, 249). On this basis the justification for keeping the precepts is deontological and grounded in respect for the common good. For parallels between Buddhism and Kant on human rights see Likhitpreechakul (Likhitpreechakul 2013).

Dependent Origination

Kenneth Inada has proposed a specific foundation for human rights in Buddhist metaphysics. In a discussion of 'The Buddhist Perspective on Human Rights,' Inada suggests 'there is an intimate and vital relationship of the Buddhist norm or Dhamma with that of human rights' (Inada 1982). He explains 'The reason for assigning human nature the basic position is very simple. It is to give human relations a firm grounding in the truly existential nature of things: that is, the concrete and dynamic relational nature of persons in contact with each other' (Inada 1982, 70).

Here Inada seems to suggest it is in the *interrelatedness* of persons that the justification for human rights is to be found. This is confirmed when he observes 'Consequently, the Buddhist concern is focused on the experiential

process of each individual, a process technically known as relational origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*)'. 'It is on this basis', he adds, that we can speak of the rights of individuals' (Inada 1982, 70f).

> The assumption is often made that interdependency provides a ground for moral respect on the basis that once we understand the nature of our deep dependence on others, moral feelings will arise spontaneously.

Demonstrations of interrelatedness in Buddhist literature often seem persuasive because they cite examples of parents, relatives, friends, teachers and loved ones who have shown kindness to us. But does the affection and respect we feel for such people arise solely from the metaphysical relationship we share with them? Perhaps not, since people do not feel the same way about every aspect of what Inada calls the 'mutually constituted existential realm' we inhabit. Children who are trafficked have an interdependent relationship with their traffickers, but the well-being of children in such situations depends on *severing* the interdependent relationship in question. Sevilla is therefore right to point out that interrelationship is important 'not on the level of ontology but on the level of soteriology. We are interrelated not merely in what we are, but in our struggle to become what we ought to be' (Sevilla 2010, 227; cf Shiotsu 2001, 149–52). The bare fact of interdependency, therefore, is an unpromising basis for human rights. It seems a *moral* foundation is needed rather than a metaphysical one.

Compassion

Perhaps compassion can meet this requirement. The Buddhist virtue of compassion (*karuṇā*) encourages us to develop the human capacity for empathy to the point where we can identify fully with the suffering of others. Some texts, for example the eighth chapter of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, speak of 'exchanging self and other' and recommend a meditational practice in which we imaginatively place ourselves in the other's position. In the West, the view known as 'sentimentalism' has long emphasized the role of the emotions in moral judgments. From this perspective, the attribution of human rights is 'an expression of a deep human ability to recognize the other as like oneself; to experience empathy for the other's needs and sufferings; to consent to, support, and rejoice in the fulfillment of the other's human capacities and well-being' (Cahill 1999, 45).

Maria Vanden Eynde (Eynde 2004) has drawn on Martha Nussbaum's work to suggest that Buddhist compassion can resolve the polarization be-

tween ethical theories of care and justice, while Jay Garfield (Garfield 1998) believes compassion can provide a moral grounding for the Dalai Lama's views on human rights. Garfield finds the influential liberal philosophy of rights unsatisfactory, and drawing on Hume's ethical theory and the work of contemporary neo-sentimentalists, proposes a form of virtue or character ethics in which 'the moral life is grounded in the cultivation and exercise of compassion' (Garfield 1998, 111). On this understanding, compassion provides the moral bedrock on top of which 'an edifice of rights' is constructed 'as a device for extending the reach of natural compassion and for securing the goods that compassion enables to all persons in a society' (Garfield 1998: 124). Rights thus become the 'tools with which each individual can protect him/herself and achieve his/her own flourishing'. 'These tools', Garfield adds, 'will be available even when our compassion or those [*sic*] of others fails, and can even be used as rhetorical vehicles to reawaken that compassion' (Garfield 1998, 124).

Garfield takes aim specifically at the liberal conception of human rights which separates the public and private spheres, but there are alternative conceptions of rights where this separation does not occur. The natural law tradition provides an example (e.g. Finnis 2011; Oderberg 2013). On this understanding there is no need for the two-tier solution Garfield proposes (an edifice of rights resting on a foundation of compassion) since the moral virtues (of which compassion is one) are integral to the generic human goods that rights protect.

A more practical problem with making compassion the foundation for rights is that feelings are rarely impartial and can often change. While Buddhas and great bodhisattvas may feel compassion for all sentient beings, most ordinary mortals do not. Garfield believes that human rights will remain accessible even in the event of 'compassion fatigue' because the legal superstructure of rights will remain in place (Garfield 1998, 126), but any weakening of the motivating foundation would surely reduce commitment to the rights founded upon it. The human rights abuses that occurred in the civil war in Sri Lanka suggest that the limits of Buddhist compassion are soon tested. Perhaps compassion can periodically be 'reawakened', but it seems to go against the grain of human rights thinking to suggest that individual A should have to awaken compassion in B to secure her human rights. And if compassion *cannot* be reawakened, human rights will simply evaporate, along with the unconditional protection they are supposed to provide. On this understanding human rights clearly cannot be *inalienable*, as the UDHR proclaims in its Preamble and the Dalai Lama also appears to believe.

> A problem with making compassion the foundation for rights is that feelings are rarely impartial and can often change. While Buddhas and great bodhisattvas may feel compassion at all times for all sentient beings, most ordinary mortals do not and never will.

While he offers no classification of his position, Garfield's account is anti-foundationalist with respect to rights. This can be seen from his comment that 'in no case is it either necessary or helpful to take the rights to which appeal is made as constituting moral bedrock' (Garfield 1998, 126). Instead, it is compassion that is regarded as 'foundational' and 'fundamental'. Perhaps, however, the relation of these elements needs to be reordered. If compassion supplies the motivation to construct an edifice of rights, and if rights function to secure the goods which constitute human flourishing, it seems to be *human flourishing* that ultimately grounds them both.

Rather than seeing rights as flowing from compassion, accordingly, it may be more accurate to see compassion as the affective *response* of a virtuous person to the perception that the condition of beings falls short of what their dignity requires. Thus, compassion may be thought of as having a cognitive structure incorporating eudaimonistic evaluations (Nussbaum 2001). On this understanding, in the specific context of human rights, compassion is the appropriate Buddhist response to injustice when society fails to give each his due as Dharma requires. Rights are then the juridical measures that reason (*prajñā*) determines are necessary to redress and prospectively forestall such injustice. If Garfield's argument is reconstructed along these lines rights cease to be foundationless and enjoy a naturalist foundation in the capacity to attain 'supreme and perfect awakening', a state in which reason and compassion play mutually supportive roles.

The 'Two Truths'

An approach in some ways related to the previous one has been developed by Christopher Kelley (Kelley 2015) in what appears to be the only full-length philosophical analysis of human rights from a Buddhist perspective, and one we cannot do justice to here. Kelly seeks to reconcile the Dalai Lama's ethics, specifically his often-voiced support for the Enlightenment concepts of inherent dignity and inalienable rights, with Madhyamaka metaphysics. The Dalai Lama has frequently spoken of a common human nature as the foundation for his humanitarian ethics, and refers to 'fundamental principles that bind us all as members of the same human family' (Keown et al 1998,

xix). As Kelley notes, he 'clearly supports a moral universalism based on our "shared humanity"' (Kelley 2015, 91). This implies foundationalism, which Kelley believes conflicts with the anti-essentialist metaphysics of the Dalai Lama's Madhyamaka philosophy. Kelley's objective is to resolve the paradox and reach an 'unforced consensus' between these two positions by drawing on the notion of the 'two truths'. 'I contend', he writes, 'that this account of the two truths is how we can make sense of the paradox of the inherent dignity of empty persons' (Kelley 2015, 30).

> Drawing on Madhyamaka teachings, Kelley proposes an anti-foundationalist interpretation of human rights to explain how 'empty persons' can have inherent dignity.

Kelley believes this strategy allows him to interpret the Dalai Lama's position on human rights in a manner 'consistent with the postmodern rejection of innate human rights and dignity espoused by contemporary "anti-foundationalist" thinkers like Richard Rorty' (Kelley 2015, 2). On this anti-foundationalist interpretation, feelings of sympathy are thought to lead to an emotional identification or 'mirroring' which gives rise to moral concern, manifesting itself as respect for other individuals and their rights. 'Such empathetic feelings,' says Kelley, 'invariably lead one to behave in a [way] that is congruent with the moral principles associated with the various human rights' (Kelley 2015, 141). Thus while rights are devoid of intrinsic nature they can, Kelley suggests, be said to have 'meaning and significance' in terms of a 'particular veridical framework' (Kelley 2015, 30) or 'symbolic system' (Kelley 2015, 36) such as that of the UNDR. The metaphysics of Dialectical Centricism (Madhyamaka) are thereby seen as supporting a form of moral particularism, where in any given case 'The morally right response would have to be relative to the individual agent's unique set of circumstances' (Kelley 2015, 164).

As with our earlier discussion of the compatibility of rights with the doctrine of no-self, some may wonder whether 'the inherent dignity of empty persons' involves a genuine paradox. It seems a paradox would only arise if 'inherent dignity' is understood in the sense of 'inherently existing dignity', in other words a dignity that in Madhyamaka terms possesses 'own-being' (*svabhāva*) and exists 'from its own side'. Foundationalists, however, do not (and certainly need not) claim this. They assert only that inherent dignity (and inalienable rights) exist in the way other entities in the world exist, in other words as enjoying what Kelley describes as 'conventional intrinsic existence' (Kelley 2015, 33). On this basis, the Dalai Lama's moral

universalism seems compatible with human rights foundationalism, which, it might be thought, provides the most intuitive interpretation of his views.

It can, of course, reasonably be argued, as Kelley does, that anti-foundationalism provides a better philosophical (and psychological) account of human rights overall, and Kelley's arguments to this effect are sophisticated and worthy of study. Here it may simply be noted that providing a foundationless justification for human rights is far from unproblematic. As Freeman points out 'if no beliefs are securely founded, anti-foundationalist beliefs themselves are not securely founded' (Freeman 1994, 496), and in practical terms 'rights without reasons are vulnerable to denial and abuse' (Freeman 1994, 493). It has also been argued that anti-foundationalism, as advocated by writers like Rorty and Ignatieff, itself appeals to moral foundations in a covert manner (Schaefer 2005), as well as presupposing a meta-theory along the lines of 'we should always act according to our own convictions' (Freeman 1994, 501).

Finally, it is not clear how anti-foundationalism is to be reconciled with belief in karma. According to orthodox Buddhist teachings, abuses of human rights like torture will inevitably attract negative karmic consequences. This is because karma, as the law of moral causation (*kamma-niyāma*), has an ontological foundation in natural law (*dhammatā*), being likened to physical laws governing heat (*utu-niyāma*) and biological growth (*bīja-niyāma*) as we noted in Chapter 7. The existence of an objective moral law of this kind, however, seems incompatible with anti-foundationalist claims that moral truth is based on local veridical frameworks.

Buddha Nature

An overtly foundationalist suggestion is that Buddha-nature can provide the required basis for human rights. Anton Sevilla has suggested 'the fact that all beings have a common essence of Buddha-nature brings an inescapable sense of solidarity to the ethical task of Mahāyāna Buddhism.' 'The ethical demand to realize Buddha-nature', furthermore, 'is something we do with and for the community of sentient beings as a whole' (Sevilla 2010, 227). The manifestation of Buddha-nature is not a once-and-for-all event so much as a dynamic unfolding through continuous practice. Dōgen calls this the doctrine of 'The Oneness of Practice and Attainment' (*shushōittō*). Sevilla notes that 'practice is the very condition that manifests and expresses our Buddha-nature and our fundamental human goodness' (Sevilla 2010, 234), and sums up the relevance of Dōgen's insights for ethics and human rights as follows:

> The traditional idea of Buddha-nature and its realization shows
> that this ethical path is one of solidarity and compassion with all
> sentient beings, where we see our struggle in *saṃsāra* as shared
> and our liberation through Buddha-nature as liberation for all.
> It was upon this idea that we grounded the need for rights and
> the importance of rights for both one's own emancipation and
> that of others. (Sevilla 2010, 248)

The rights that issue from this understanding are said to have two charac-
teristics. First, they will be 'grounded in a genuine sense of solidarity with
human beings on the deepest ground of our shared struggle'; and second,
they will be based 'not on a presumed human nature on which other people
may or may not agree but rather on a historical response to the actual suf-
fering of people and in solidarity with their struggle' (Sevilla 2010, 248).
Sevilla is wise to avoid basing human rights on a specific conception of
human nature given the variety of inconsistent views about how it is to be
defined. A better candidate is human good, a possibility adumbrated in the
reference to suffering and struggle. What such struggle involves is overcom-
ing obstacles that stand in the way of well-being, and since there is general
agreement on what the obstacles are (tyranny, injustice, discrimination, and
other abuses catalogued in human rights charters) it should be easier to reach
agreement on the core values that structure well-being.

Toru Shiotsu suggests that 'From the doctrine of Buddha-nature we can
derive much related to the concept of human dignity' (Shiotsu 2001, 146).
One ground of human dignity is the capacity for rational choice, not in the
sense of bare autonomy (as liberal theories of rights assume), but as the
choice of those goods which are truly constitutive of human well-being.
Human dignity (a dignity already manifest in its most radical form through
the achievement of a human rebirth) arises from the innate capacity to
participate in these goods. Examples would include life and health (protected
by articles 3 and 25.1), knowledge and education (protected by article 26),
friendship and sociability (protected by articles 3, 13, and 20), and religious
belief (protected by article 18).

> The concept of Buddha-nature has many attractions
> as a foundation for human rights. It grounds rights in
> human good (awakening); it explains why rights are in-
> alienable and universal (all beings have buddha-nature);
> and it provides a Buddhist equivalent for 'human dig-
> nity.'

Dōgen's conception of human good, as Sevilla explains it, has much in common with Aristotelian conceptions of human flourishing as the progressive unfolding of potential through the cultivation of virtues (Nussbaum 1997), as well as Western natural law thinking about rights as a requirement of justice which facilitate and promote of the common good. Thus 'realizing one's Buddha-nature requires that we possess the rights and liberties necessary for us to pursue spiritually meaningful lives' (Sevilla 2010, 249). Human rights are thus the legal means by which moral theory is translated into normative practice. As Sevilla comments, 'Rights can be seen as institutional means for upholding certain general forms of right conduct' (Sevilla 2010, 222), and 'the ethical demand to realize Buddha-nature is something we do with and for the community of sentient beings as a whole' (Sevilla 2010, 227). In contrast to anti-foundationalism such rights are seen as innate entitlements having an ontological foundation in the radical capacity of all beings to attain Buddhahood.

Buddha-nature has many attractions as a foundation for human rights. It grounds rights in human good; it explains why rights are inalienable and universal; it provides a Buddhist equivalent for 'human dignity'; and it can also encompass non-human forms of life (since dignity is a rank of being rather than an absolute state, different forms of life will have rights appropriate to their natures). As a formal doctrine, however, it is sectarian, and is understood differently among Mahāyāna schools. Some, like the Madhyamaka, may even wish to challenge its essentialist presuppositions. The concept of 'Buddha-nature' is also unknown in early Buddhism, although having antecedents in the belief that all beings have the capacity to attain awakening, as noted by Perera.

4 Conclusion

The modern idea of human rights has a distinctive cultural origin, but its underlying preoccupation with well-being is one Buddhism shares. Human rights can be seen as an explication of what is 'due' under Dharma and hence an authentic expression of Buddhist teachings. Each of the proposals discussed above finds a resonance between human rights and specific teachings. In this sense perhaps we should speak of multiple foundations for human rights. Yet focusing on individual teachings may be unnecessarily divisive: approaches which emphasize compassion, for example, have little to say about wisdom. It might be thought that a successful foundation for human rights should be comprehensive, as well as rooted in the core teachings of

Buddhism accepted by all schools. It would thus seem desirable for any proposed foundation to meet the criteria formulated by Evans namely: 1) Simplicity: ordinary Buddhists must be able to understand the argument; 2) Universality: it must be based on principles that all Buddhists accept; 3) Authority or dignity: the theory must articulate the moral inviolability, or its equivalent, of the human person; 4) It must integrate Buddhist 'resignation' (acceptance of the reality of suffering) with human rights advocacy (Evans 1998, 141).

> The rights proclaimed by the UDHR and similar documents can be understood as facilitating the liberation from suffering and the achievement of self-realization proclaimed in the Four Noble Truths.

Perhaps the most basic Buddhist doctrine of all – the Four Noble Truths – can meet these requirements. All Buddhist schools affirm the account of human nature and its fulfilment set out in the Four Noble Truths, and all the approaches considered have their foundation in some aspect or other of this teaching. The precepts form part of the Fourth Noble Truth (under the category of *sīla* or 'morality'), and the doctrine of dependent origination, especially in its soteriological form, is associated with the second (the arising of suffering). The innate capacity for awakening (or 'Buddha-nature') is affirmed in the Third Noble Truth. Universal compassion arises from an unrestricted sensitivity to human suffering, described in the First Noble Truth, and is the virtue that motivated the Buddha to teach the four truths (SN i.136:231). An interpretation along these lines seems to meet the conditions Evans describes regarding simplicity, universality, authority, and authenticity. On this basis, the rights proclaimed by the UDHR and similar documents can be understood as facilitating the liberation from suffering and the achievement of self-realisation proclaimed in the Four Noble Truths.

Incorporating human rights more formally within Buddhism, however, will require some doctrinal expansion and reconfiguration. Buddhism has not provided much in the way of theoretical accounts of the relationship between the individual and society. Early Buddhism teaches a path to liberation though self-development and offers the *saṅgha* as the community in which this task can best be carried out. Mahāyāna Buddhism believes that bodhisattvas will take upon themselves the responsibility for universal liberation. Little is said in the classical sources, at least, about the responsibilities of the broader political community and the social structures required to facilitate the common good, a subject with which human rights are centrally

concerned. Buddhism now faces the challenge of discovering 'resources for fresh elaboration' (Cohen 2004, 213) so that its political and social teachings can evolve in response to new circumstances while remaining faithful to doctrinal foundations.

5 Learning Resources for this Chapter

Key points you need to know

- Engaged Buddhist leaders express strong support for human rights, but others point to the absence of a concept of rights in Buddhist teachings and are suspicious of its Western origins.
- Buddhist organisations today work to promote human rights, but Buddhism's own record is not unblemished.
- The most well-known modern charter of human rights is *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948.
- *Foundationalists* believe that human rights rest on an objective moral order. *Anti-foundationalists* believe human rights are cultural constructs. *Sceptics* deny there is any such thing as human rights. *Relativists* believe there cannot be universal human rights because of the diversity of human cultures.
- Critics suggest Buddhists believe teachings like no-self and emptiness present *metaphysical* obstacles to the concept of rights. Others raise *soteriological* objections, such as that rights promote egoism and hinder spiritual development.
- Supporters propose different foundations for rights in Buddhist teachings, such as the precepts, dependent-origination, compassion, and Buddha-nature. Others propose an anti-foundationalist interpretation based on Madhyamaka philosophy.
- There is no agreement as to a philosophical foundation for human rights in Buddhism, but it seems desirable that any proposed foundation should be acceptable to all Buddhist schools. The Four Noble Truths are a possible foundation.

Discussion Questions

1. Does the fact that there is no word for 'rights' in canonical Buddhist languages mean the concept of rights has no place in Buddhist teachings?
2. Why might some Buddhists be suspicious of the idea of human rights?
3. If there is no self, who do human rights belong to?
4. What foundations can you see in Buddhist teachings for the idea of human rights?
5. If Engaged Buddhism supports human rights, should Disengaged Buddhism oppose them?

Further Reading

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Afterword

In the Introduction we spoke of a threefold classification of Buddhist ethics into worldly, supramundane, and transcendent. We have suggested this distinction arises from an erroneous conception of *puñña* as in opposition to *kusala*. For this reason, we rejected the threefold classification in favour of a unified soteriological path. There is one path, and one goal. In fact, the path *is* the goal, and the state of perfection it leads to is unified but not unitary. Well-being has two primary divisions, namely moral and prudential good. We can subdivide moral good into moral and epistemic virtue, thus giving three aspects to well-being overall. This was illustrated in the form of a circle in the Introduction (Figure 1).

Why does well-being have these three dimensions? Because human nature is the way it is. Buddhism analyses human nature into five 'aggregates' (*khandha*), as discussed in Chapter 2. We see from this formulation that humans have physical bodies (*rūpa*) and consequently material needs. They reproduce biologically and need social structures (like the family) to provide for the nurture and care of offspring. They live in societies and need institutions like schools and hospitals to educate the young and take care of the sick. These institutions in turn depend on economic resources. For reasons of this kind, human beings need prudential goods if they are to flourish.

Apart from material and social needs, human beings have a nature that admits of perfectibility in two main areas. Because human beings have feelings (*vedanā*), they can learn to love the good; and because they have the power of conceptual thought (*saññā*), they can know the good epistemically. They also have the power of volition or will (*cetanā*), and these three powers work together: the intellect knows the good; the emotions love and desire it; and the will (*cetanā*) directs us towards it. Our good is thus determined by our nature. It follows that the good is not attained exclusively through epistemic means, as many interpreters of Buddhism suggest. To assume so neglects the perfectibility of the emotions and will leaving the human *telos* only partly attained.

Readers will recognise the position just described as a 'nature fulfilment' theory of well-being of the kind discussed in Chapter 3. The Four Noble Truths presuppose a nature-fulfilment theory because they first specify the

imperfections in human nature (in the First and Second) and then explain how they can be overcome (in the Third and Fourth). We can further qualify Buddhist ethics as a form of excellence-prior Eudaimonism. This contrasts with a 'welfare-prior' understanding, which would identify nirvana with the end of suffering. Such is the position of the 'Nirodha view' we considered in Chapter 10. On this interpretation, the highest goal of Buddhism is mundane (*lokiya*) because suffering is a matter of welfare and welfare is a worldly value.

In the Introduction, we posed several questions we are now in a position to answer. One was whether it is better to be good (virtuous), or happy (free from suffering). This turns out to be a false dichotomy because there is no possibility of happiness without virtue. Worldly happiness by itself is shallow and any freedom from suffering it brings is temporary. We also asked whether virtue by itself is sufficient for happiness and whether all the virtues are one. We have already provided an answer to the second part by saying that while knowledge is necessary for virtue the moral virtues are not reducible to knowledge. The answer to the first part should by now be obvious, namely that happiness is incomplete in the absence of prudential good. Perhaps the epigraph from Aristotle at the start of the book will now make more sense. He asked rhetorically, 'What is to prevent us, then, from concluding that the happy person is the one who, *adequately furnished with external goods*, engages in activities in accordance with complete virtue?' (NE 1101a14, emphasis added).

We have suggested that the Buddhist answer to this question is that nothing stands in the way of this conclusion: the virtuous person furnished with external goods *is* the happy (*eudaimon*) person. The happy or fulfilled individual is one who enjoys an adequate level of welfare (in the form of bodily, social, economic, and material goods); possesses moral excellence (in the form of virtues like generosity and compassion); and has attained intellectual excellence (in the form of virtues like epistemic and practical wisdom). *Kusala* and *puñña* are united in his person.

We also spoke in the Introduction of a 'journey' and expressed the hope that by the end of it we might catch a glimpse of the 'moral bedrock' upon which the edifice of Buddhist ethics rests. This is not difficult to see. The parameters of well-being are determined by human nature, and from this starting point the Buddhist Path brings the capacities of this nature to fulfilment in nirvana. The 'moral bedrock' of Buddhist ethics is therefore human nature. This conclusion raises further questions, but these must await discussion on another occasion.

As was pointed out in the Introduction, all interpretations of Buddhist ethics are controversial. In the circumstances, the reader may sympathise with the Kālāmas whom the Buddha addressed in the following terms: 'It is fitting for you to be perplexed, Kālāmas, fitting for you to be in doubt; Doubt has arisen in you about a perplexing matter' (AN i.189:280). The student is well-advised, therefore, to follow the Buddha's advice and review all opinions carefully before reaching any conclusions about the perplexing nature of Buddhist ethics.

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Glossary of Ethical Terms and Concepts

Act-consequentialism A form of consequentialism that holds that the right action is the one that produces the greatest balance of good over bad consequences. In contrast to rule-consequentialism, it claims that actions should be determined on a case-by-case basis rather than by reference to a rule.

Agent-centred theories focus on the psychology of the moral agent in determining right and wrong, whereas action-centred theories focus on the nature of acts.

Agent-neutral consequentialism says we should assess overall consequences from an impersonal perspective.

Agent-relative consequentialism is the view that we should prioritise the situation of the agent when evaluating consequences.

Agreement conceptions of human rights allow consensus to be reached in the face of cultural and philosophical differences. They give up any claim to be 'foundationalist'.

Ahiṃsā The moral principle of non-harming or non-violence emphasised especially by heterodox schools like Jainism and Buddhism.

Akiriyavāda The doctrine that there are no consequences to moral acts; the denial of karma.

Akrasia Greek term meaning 'weakness of will' or the disposition to act contrary to one's own judgement about what is morally right.

Anti-foundationalism The doctrine that there is no objective foundation for human rights.

Arete Greek term meaning virtue or excellence.

Avyākata A karmically-neutral action or mental function.

Brahmacariya A pure or holy life emphasising the virtue of chastity.

Buddhist modernism An umbrella term for a contemporary movement in Western Buddhism that seeks to reconstruct traditional teachings so as to place a stronger emphasis on rationality, secularism, compatibility with modern science, individualism, and the exploitation of psychological techniques of self-enhancement and mental health. Groups forming part of this movement designate themselves by various names, such as 'neo-Buddhism,' 'naturalized Buddhism,' and 'Secular Buddhism.'

Categorical imperative In Kantian ethics, an unconditional moral obligation that is binding in all circumstances and is not dependent on a person's inclination or aims.

Cetanā Intention, will, or volition. It is shaped or influenced by the three roots of good (or evil).

Confucianism Teachings of the Chinese sage Confucius (551-479 BC). Scholars have suggested he taught a form of virtue ethics.

Consequentialism An ethical theory that justifies actions by reference to their outcomes.

Deontology An ethical theory that emphasises duty and obligation. It holds that certain acts are intrinsically right and others intrinsically wrong. In contrast to consequentialism, it teaches that the rightness or wrongness of an act is not (or not wholly) determined by the goodness or badness of its consequences.

Descriptive ethics A branch of ethics concerned with describing the ethical beliefs and practices of a group or society.

Desire-satisfaction A class of theories that identify well-being with the satisfaction of desires.

Determinism The doctrine that every event has a cause and the future is in principle predictable.

Dhamma Buddhist teachings, natural law.

Dharmaśāstra An ancient Indian body of jurisprudence that is authoritative for the religious and legal duties of Hindus.

Disengaged Buddhism The view that social and political activism is unfruitful and can be detrimental to spiritual progress.

Engaged Buddhism A contemporary movement concerned with developing Buddhist solutions to social, political, economic, and ecological problems.

Epicureanism One of the three dominant philosophies of the Hellenistic age. In ethics, it teaches that pleasure is the one good and our innately sought goal, to which all other values are subordinated.

Epistemic virtue The intellectual virtue that apprehend the truth about the way things are. Its Greek name is *sophia* and in Buddhism it is known as *paññā*.

Epistemology A branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge.

Ethics The branch of philosophy that deals with moral conduct.

Eudaimon Greek term meaning blessed, fortunate, or happy. It is the condition of the person who has attained eudaimonia.

Eudaimonic enlightenment Term coined by author Seth Segall to describe a modern Western concept of well-being that combines aspects of nirvana and eudaimonia.

Eudaimonism A philosophy teaching that happiness or well-being is the supreme value.

Excellence-prior eudaimonia A form of eudaimonia in which virtue is taken as fundamental. It is usually contrasted with welfare-prior eudaimonia.

External goods Human goods that are external to the agent, such as wealth, friends, political influence, and good children. Also known as 'ordinary' or 'prudential' goods.

Foundationalism The doctrine that human rights are the expression of an underlying and independent order of moral values in some sense innate in human nature.

Golden Rule The moral principle that one should do (or not do) to others what one would like them to do (or not do) to oneself.

Hita-sukha Virtue and happiness.

Intellectual virtue General name for virtues of the mind, in contrast to the moral virtues or virtues of character.

Kalon Greek term meaning what is fine, noble, or beautiful.

Kamma-niyāma The moral order of cause and effect, one of five natural orders.

Kammatic Buddhism A form of Buddhist practice thought to consist exclusively in the performance of good deeds leading to the production of merit (*puñña*) and a fortunate rebirth.

Kammavāda A general term for any doctrine that promulgates belief in the soteriological efficacy of moral action.

Karma The moral law of cause and effect.

Kiriya 'Functional' or karmically inoperative consciousness.

Kiriyavāda Belief in karma, or the doctrine that there are consequences to moral acts.

Kusala Term of moral approbation denoting what is virtuous, good, or wholesome.

Lokiya Any activity or practice associated with the mundane world of unenlightened beings.

Lokuttara Term denoting those things related to salvation and the quest for nirvana as opposed to the values of the mundane (*lokiya*) world.

Mental-state theories A class of theories that identify well-being with the experience of positive mental states like pleasure.

Metaethics A branch of ethics concerned with the analysis of moral terms and concepts.

Metaphysics A branch of philosophy that investigates the nature of reality.

Methodology The systematic analysis of the methods applied to a field of study.

Moral philosophy Also known as 'philosophical ethics', moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that seeks to determine what is right and wrong. It explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to one another.

Moral virtue A class of virtue including virtues of character such as courage and generosity. Moral virtue can be distinguished from epistemic virtue. The role of moral virtue is practical: it helps us govern our emotions and live the virtuous or 'noble' life specified in Buddhist teachings.

Naturalism The view that human rights are like the 'natural rights' said to be enjoyed by human beings 'as such' or 'simply in view of their humanity'.

Nature-fulfilment A class of theories holding that well-being results from the fulfilment of certain innate powers or natural capacities.

Nibbānic Buddhism A form of Buddhist practice thought to focus exclusively on the cultivation of wisdom leading to nirvana and the end of rebirth.

Nirodha view A view proposed by Daniel Breyer that identifies well-being with the elimination of suffering.

Nirvana The highest form of Buddhist well-being. Two forms are distinguished: nirvana as the extinction of the defilements (*kilesa-parinibbāna*), attained during life; and nirvana as the extinction of the aggregates (*khandha-parinibbāna*), which takes place on death.

Nirvana view A view of well-being proposed by Owen Flanagan that defines nirvana as 'a stable sense of serenity and contentment caused or constituted by wisdom and virtue'. It therefore excludes prudential good.

Nītiśāstra A branch of Indian philosophy dealing with politics and the duties and responsibilities of a ruler.

Niyati Fate or destiny, especially in a deterministic sense.

Normative ethics The branch of ethics concerned with how we ought to act.

Objective list theories A class of theories that define well-being by reference to a list of values.

Objectivism (or 'cognitivism') is the doctrine that there are objective moral facts that can be known, and that moral properties exist independently of the mind of the person who apprehends them.

Ordinary goods are non-moral, prudential, or 'external' goods like health, friendship, economic security, and social esteem. They may also be described as 'blessings' or 'boons', or simply 'good fortune'. Ordinary goods include anything that makes a person 'better off' or contributes to his welfare

Orientalism Term coined by Edward Said to describe the West's derogatory portrayal of the East in art and literature.

Pārājika The four gravest offences in the monastic code.

Particularism An ethical theory that emphasises individual discretion (as opposed to following rules) when deciding what is morally appropriate in a situation.

Pātimokkha The disciplinary code of monastic rules that is recited every fortnight by the assembled *saṅgha*.

Perfectionism A moral theory according to which certain states or activities of human beings, such as knowledge, achievement, and artistic creation, are good and should be sought for themselves. Perfectionism comes in two main forms: agent-relative and agent-neutral. The former prioritises self-development and the latter the improvement of society at large.

Phala The 'fruit' of a karmic act.

Phronesis Aristotle's name for the virtue of 'practical wisdom' or 'prudence'. It is distinguished from theoretical wisdom, or *sophia*.

Preference utilitarianism A form of utilitarianism that values the fulfilment of personal interests rather than the maximisation of a single common utility.

***Prima facie* duties** Term introduced by W.D. Ross to refer to defeasible obligations that can be overridden when circumstances demand.

Principle of utility The basic principle of utilitarianism, namely that actions or behaviours are right in so far as they promote a certain 'utility', such as happiness or pleasure, and wrong when they fail to do so.

Prudential goods are non-moral or 'ordinary' goods like health, friendship, economic security, and social esteem. They may also be described as 'external goods', as 'blessings' or 'boons', or simply 'good fortune'. Prudential goods include anything that makes a person 'better off' or contributes to his welfare.

Puñña* and *pāpa Good and bad fortune.

Puñña Merit, or the result of karmically wholesome (*kusala*) action. *Puñña* can refer to a moral act, to the 'goodness power' produced by the act, or to the concrete goods (such as health and wealth) that result from it.

Relativists Those who deny that human rights can be universal because of the empirical diversity of cultures and moral values.

Roots of evil (*akusala-mūla*) The three are greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*). They are the opposite of the three roots of good (*kusala-mūla*).

Roots of good (*kusala-mūla*) The three are non-greed (*arāga*), non-hatred (*adosa*), and non-delusion (*amoha*). They are the opposite of the three roots of evil (*akusala-mūla*).

Rule-consequentialism A form of consequentialism that holds that the right action is one that conforms to a general rule of conduct that on the whole produces best consequences. It differs from act-consequentialism**,** which holds that actions should be assessed by on a case-by-case basis.

Sīla Term with a wide range of meanings, such as morality, virtue, good conduct, ethics. *Sīla* is used in two main ways: first, to refer to moral precepts and conduct that is in accordance with them; and second to denote the first of the three components (*khandha*) of the Eightfold Path.

Sīlakkhandhavagga The 'Collection of *suttas* on *sīla*'. Collective name given to the first thirteen *suttas* of the Long Discourses (Dīgha Nikāya).

Skilful Means (*upāya-kauśalya*) The judicious use of methods and strategies by a bodhisattva to secure the welfare of beings, particularly when involving a breach of the precepts.

Socratic paradox One of various dilemmas used by Socrates as a means of exploring problematic issues in philosophy.

Sophia Knowledge of eternal truths or things that we cannot change.

Soteriology A doctrine or teaching concerned with attaining salvation.

Stoicism A school of Greek philosophy founded by Zeno (334–-262 BCE) famous for its teaching that virtue alone is sufficient for happiness.

Subjectivism The doctrine that what makes something good for a person is determined solely by that person's attitude towards the thing in question. Subjectivism (or 'non-cognitivism') denies there are moral facts that can be known, and holds that moral judgements are expressions of attitudes, desires, or feelings.

Sui generis Latin expression meaning unique, or one of a kind.

Telos Greek term meaning goal, object, or end. Aristotle used it to describe the inherent purpose or function of a person or thing.

Theory of the good A theory that tells us what has value, e.g. pleasure.

Theory of the right A normative theory that tells us what actions to perform, and in what way we should pursue the good.

Three Tracts Three textual passages listing various *sīlas* or moral observances for which 'the ascetic Gotama' might be praised by a worldly person. The three tracts are known as the short (*cūla*), medium (*majjhima*) and long

(*mahā*) *sīlas* and are repeated in each of the first thirteen *suttas* of the Dīgha Nikāya.

Utilitarianism An ethical theory that determines right from wrong by focusing on outcomes. It is a form of consequentialism. Utilitarianism holds that the ethical choice is the one that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number.

Value monism An ethical theory that reduces the good to a single value, such as pleasure.

Value pluralism An ethical theory that understands the good as comprising more than one value.

Vipāka The result of a karmic act, similar in meaning to *phala*.

Virtue A character trait or habitual way of acting in an excellent or admirable manner.

Virtue ethics An ethical theory that treats virtue as a fundamental ethical concept. It sees the development of good character as the foundation of the moral life.

Welfare The material, social, and economic conditions of well-being.

Welfare-prior eudaimonia An understanding of eudaimonia that makes welfare rather than virtue foundational.

Well-being A state of happiness, flourishing, or fulfilment.

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