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Buddhist Ethics in the Context of Conventional Truth
Path and Transformation

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Introduction: The Problem to Be Dissolved

Why are we worried about ethics, per se, in the context of conventional truth and the Madhyamaka understanding of the two truths? What is the special problem about ethics, once we understand that to take the two truths seriously is to take the conventional truth seriously as a truth? (Cowherds 2011). In this chapter, we argue that there is nothing to worry about; there is no special problem. Instead of solving a problem about ethics in the context of conventional truth, the project in this chapter is to dissolve an apparent problem. But this is Madhyamaka analysis, and so, following Tsongkhapa’s practice (Cowherds 2011, esp. chapter 5) we must begin by identifying the object of negation, that is, to be clear about what we are arguing does not exist—in this case, the apparent problem. As we will see in subsequent chapters, however, demonstrating that the problem about ethics is not special does not by itself show that there are no difficulties in seeing how ethics is meant to go in the context of conventional truth.

The problem before us concerns the degree to which ethical truths or injunctions can be binding on us if they are “only” conventionally true. That is, does the conventional status of ethical truth take us straight to ethical relativism, or at least to
ethical "optionalism?" We want to know that it is really true that torturing children is wrong, that generosity is to be cultivated, and that suffering is bad. Adding "conventionally" to any of these claims appears to weaken their force and to render ethics insufficiently important. And of course for any non-Mādhyamika, for whom there is a substantial difference between conventional and ultimate truth, this would be a weakener. On the other hand, as we will see, for a Mādhyamika, for whom these truths are in an important sense identical, it is not.

This initial observation should lead us to be suspicious of the worry with which we began right off the bat. Despite its apparent origin in a laudable moral seriousness, it is a bit precious to insist that while it might be only conventionally true that the earth is round, that we all die, and that the speed of light is constant across inertial frames, moral truth demands more than this. If the qualifier "conventional" really is a weakener, then, as epistemic agents, we should be as worried about it as we are as moral agents. Of course the burden of Cowherds (2011) is that it is not a weakener, and that conventional truth is indeed truth in the full sense of the word. We cannot, as we emphasize in Chapters 3 and 11 of this volume, fall into the dismal slough against which Kamalaśīla warns us. That should, perhaps, end the story in the case of ethics, and I think it does close one chapter in the proceedings. But there is a lingering worry. Let me put that worry into relief before finally setting it aside.

The conventional status of ethical truth seems to pose a special problem for two reasons. First, in part because of its normative character—because of the fact that, as we note in Chapter 2, there is implicit reference to an ideal of ethical behavior, to a state of perfection, perhaps of buddhahood—it appears to take us beyond the "merely" conventional. That reference to an ideal might suggest that ethical truth answers to a higher standard than does empirical truth. (We might also compare Kant's insistence on the regulative role of the idea of a holy will, or a kingdom of ends, in constituting a doctrine of moral obligation.) In virtue of its responsibility to a kind of perfection to which we are called, and in virtue of the absolute nature of perfection, ethics may demand more than conventional reality can deliver. This, I think, is the interesting motivation for a special worry about ethics in the context of the two truths. We can and will dissolve this worry, and doing so will allow us to bring the structure of Madhyamaka ethics into clearer focus, allowing us to answer more specific questions as we proceed.

A second reason for this worry is the specter of relativism. No (informed, sane) person suggests that the earth is flat, or that the speed of light varies with inertial frame, or even that these are reasonable options—conventions
that (informed, sane) people might rationally adopt. But there are apparently informed, sane people who disagree deeply with one another about ethical matters: about the permissibility of abortion or infanticide; about the permissibility of certain kinds of non-consensual genital mutilation; about the obligations of the rich to the poor; about whether patriotism or fundamentalism are virtues or vices; about whether rights are trumped by utility, and so on. And while some argue that—dispute about such matters notwithstanding—there are correct answers to these questions, others argue that this plurality of views and intractability of dispute should lead us to adopt relativism, anti-realism, moral skepticism, or worse. It might then appear that when ethics is relegated to conventional truth, we have no basis for any kind of moral realism.

Now we are not here concerned directly with the metaethical questions of moral realism or relativism. But we must be concerned with the question of the logical connection between a Madhyamaka understanding of ethics and these positions. In particular, we should wonder whether, as the Cowherds (2011) argued, although Madhyamaka does not lead to relativism or to anti-realism in the metaphysical and epistemological domain, it does so in the moral domain. Part of the burden of this chapter is to suggest that there is parity between these domains in this respect. While Madhyamaka locates ethics firmly in the conventional, this does not entail that ethical truth is any less robust than empirical truth.

In this chapter, we will be concerned with the ethical thought of each of the four important Madhyamaka philosophers toward whose views this volume is addressed—Nāgārjuna, Āryadeva, Candrakīrti, and Śāntideva. While Nāgārjuna, as we saw in Chapter 2, initiates Madhyamaka ethical reflection in Ratnavañī (Garland of Jewels), and, as we will note below, also in Mūlamadhyamakakārikā (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way), Āryadeva in Catuḥśatika (Four Hundred Verses) is the first Madhyamaka philosopher to think ethics through systematically, and particularly to address the relationship between ethics and the two truths. Candrakīrti, of all Indian Mādhyamika philosophers, inquires most deeply into the status of conventional truth and into the relationship between the two truths. In his Madhyamakāvatāra-bhāṣya (Commentary on Introduction to the Middle Way) and his Catuḥśatika-tīka (Commentary on the Four Hundred Verses), he addresses ethical concerns in the context of his Madhyamaka ontology and epistemology. Śāntideva in Bodhicaryāvatāra (How To Lead an Awakened Life) follows Candrakīrti closely metaphysically, and indeed is always classified with him as a dByin ma thal “gyur pa, or Prāśangika Mādhyamika (reductio-wielder) in Tibetan doxography. But he, more than any other Indian Mādhyamika, develops the ethical side of Madhyamaka in detail. The reading of these texts presented in this chapter is certainly inflected by Tibetan
commentarial literature, and especially the commentaries of Tsongkhapa and rGyal tshab.

Path versus Fruition as the Domain of Ethics

It is important when thinking about Buddhist ethics to focus on the distinction between path and result, or fruition. It is tempting, given the normative character of ethics, and the role of ideals in the specification of norms, to think that the consideration of the motivation, psychology, or action of a Buddha is what drives Buddhist ethics. After all, one might think, since a Buddha is perfect, hence ethically perfect, and since Buddhahood is the ideal toward which a Buddhist strives, the way to figure out the content of Buddhist ethics is to figure out what a Buddha does, why she or he does it, and what she or he is like. Once again, a comparison to Kant, and his insistence on measuring our motivations against those of a will, or a legislator for a kingdom of ends is apposite, as is the Aristotelian perfectionism to which we compare Buddhist ethics in Chapter 2.

But this would be wrong, and would be to ignore the structure of Buddhist moral theory. Buddhist ethics is about path. After all, Buddhism, as we note in the Introduction to this volume, from the very beginning, is about solving a problem—that of the universality and pervasiveness of dukkha, and the route to solving the problem is the eightfold noble path. That path articulates the domain of ethics; hence ethics is a means to the achievement of liberation, not something to be fully achieved upon liberation. For that reason, we focus not on perfection when addressing Buddhist ethics, but upon the means of self-cultivation.¹

Now, of course path and goal are intimately bound up. Paths are paths to goals, and the Buddhist path is a path to liberation (and, in the case of more specific paths, paths to specific intermediate goals necessary to that final goal). It is therefore necessary to conceptualize and to reflect on the nature of the goal in order to motivate the structure of the path. Buddhahood is therefore not irrelevant to Madhyamaka ethics. Nonetheless, we will argue, its relevance is only indirect: the point of Madhyamaka ethics is not to characterize buddhahood, but rather the path thereto; the content of Madhayamaka ethics does not

¹ One might reply that the prominence of the paramitās, or perfections, in Mahāyāna ethics undermines this claim. But in that context, the paramitās are aspirational: goals toward which we strive, not conditions of ethical life.
directly reflect the motivation of a Buddha, but rather that of the bodhisattva. It is therefore much more intimately connected to path than to goal.

This is an important difference between Buddhist ethics and most (though not all) Greco-European ethical theory. While most Western ethical theory concerns itself with ordinary conduct, it generally takes its point of departure from the ideal, rather than from the standpoint of the aspirant. Aristotle, for instance, as we saw in Chapter 2, focuses on the highest good as the guiding principle of the Nicomachean Ethics. The corresponding focus in Buddhist ethics would be the state of awakening. But that state does not figure in ethics from a Buddhist standpoint—it is rather para-ethical, to coin a useful term. Kant in the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals asks us to take a transcendental standpoint, thinking of ourselves as pure rational beings. Buddhist moral theorists instead ask us to take the standpoint of those who could do better—of practitioners who recognize their own moral imperfection and see a route to progressive improvement. Utilitarian moral theory adopts an absolute standard of moral excellence, requiring a calculus performed by an ideal hedonic accountant. Buddhist theory asks us to attend to more local matters (but note the connections we find between Buddhist ethics and consequentialism in Chapter 8 of this volume). It may well be that the closest we can come to Buddhist approaches to ethics in the Western tradition would be Humean moral theory, possibly in its more particularist incarnations. But our concern here is not with comparison or indeed with Western ethics at all. These remarks are intended only to forestall false starts that are all too common as those of us raised on a diet of European ethics approach Buddhist moral theory.

Moreover, the Buddhist idea of path (mārga/lam) is complex on at least three dimensions. First, we encounter at least two principal versions of the path to awakening—one in the Dhammacakkapavatanna-sutta (Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of Doctrine) in the context of the articulation of the four noble truths and one in the context of the Bodhisattva path that structures much Mahāyāna thought. Second, path is not simply conceptualized as an external route along which one travels, but also as an internal state of being that one cultivates. So one often reads of a path “arising” in a practitioner, as well as of a practitioner attaining or traversing a path. Attending to this internal dimension

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2. Stoic and Epicurean thought are important counterexamples to this trend. And indeed there are intriguing affinities between Hellenistic and Roman ethical thought and Buddhist ethical thought that are outside the scope of this chapter.

3. Of course it is not the truths themselves that are noble; rather they are truths to be taken seriously by those who would be noble. They are ennobling truths. The same goes, mutatis mutandis, for the eightfold noble path.
of the idea of path helps us to focus on the role of Buddhist ethics in personal cultivation.

Third, the three principal divisions of the eightfold path—śīla/tsul khrim, samādhi/ting nge ‘dzin and prajñā/ye shes—are often translated as ethics, meditation, and wisdom, while the three principal aspects of the Mahāyāna path as articulated in the Tibetan sa lam (grounds and path) literature—blos gtong/saṃtyāga, byang chub sems/bodhicitta, and stong pa nyid/sānyatā—are often translated as renunciation, altruistic aspiration, and emptiness. While these are not entirely erroneous, in this context they tend to give the impression that in the case of the Śrāvakayāna (Disciples’ Vehicle) tradition only the first aspect is specifically ethical, and that in the Mahāyāna tradition only the first two are. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let us take these three points in turn.

First, consider the two paths: the first is the eightfold noble path. It comprises right view, intention, speech, action, effort, livelihood, attention, and meditation. By characterizing this as a path, and in virtue of glossing samyak (right, or correct) in terms of being conducive to awakening, and in virtue of a rather laconic approach to filling that content out in each case, the eightfold path encourages thinking about ethics in terms of concern and attention to a range of domains, the domains of view, intention, speech, and so on—each a domain in which what we do matters ethically. This eightfold path metaphor thus encourages us to see ethics as comprising all of life—how we think, our aspirations and goals, what we say and do, how we organize our lives professionally and socially, and the thoughtfulness we bring to life. In each of these domains, self-improvement is possible. In each of these domains, there are right and wrong ways to conduct ourselves, and to take responsibility for our cognitive, verbal, and physical conduct in each of these domains is the principal demand of moral agency.

The bodhisattva path, as articulated in the Avatāṃsaka sūtra and its many commentaries, and which structures all of Mahāyāna Buddhist moral thought, is divided into five, two of which are preparatory to the first bodhisattva stage or ground (bhūmi/sa) and the final three of which comprise the ten bodhisattva stages. Unlike the eightfold path, which one practices all at once, the bodhisattva path is set out as a sequence of practices, achievements, and goals. The first two are the paths of accumulation and preparation. On these paths one first accumulates the merit and understanding necessary to undertake the arduous further paths to perfection and then undertakes the

4. See Dreyfus (1995) for more specific discussion of why meditation per se is a matter of moral concern and Garfield (2012) for parallel discussion of mindfulness and morality.
practices necessary to toughen one’s resolve. The third path is the path of insight, associated with the first bodhisattva stage of joy at which the practice of generosity dominates moral life. The fourth is the path of meditation. This path comprises a number of stages: the stainless, luminous, radiant, challenging, transcendent, and far-gone, at which proper conduct (śīla/tshul khrim), patience, energy, meditative concentration, wisdom, and liberative skill (upāya/thab mkhas) dominate life, respectively. The final path is that of no more learning, comprising the two stages of discriminative wisdom and of the domain of reality (dharmadhatu/chos dbying), where transcendent power and primordial wisdom predominate.

The bodhisattva path so articulated differs in structure and content from the eightfold path. It is sequential, rather than simultaneous,² and the moral domains on which it focuses are primarily internal, concerned directly with self-cultivation.⁶ Nonetheless, it is important to note first that the eightfold path is not replaced, but rather is supplemented by the bodhisattva path, and so its domains of concern remain in place when we turn to bodhisattva practice. They constitute the spheres within which the cognitive and affective states cultivated on the bodhisattva path operate. Second, while the paths and stages of the bodhisattva path are indeed sequential, the moral characteristics that dominate each stage are not strictly sequential. They are mutually implicative, and their salience at various stages is a matter of emphasis, not of exclusive manifestation.

Nonetheless, juxtaposing the bodhisattva path and the eightfold path allows us to see clearly the double aspect of the notion of path itself. On the one hand, it is to be traversed, a way from an initial state to a goal state—whether that is from samsāra to nirvāṇa or from confusion (avidya/ma rig pa or moha/gti mug) to awakening (bodhi/byang chub). The stages on the bodhisattva path are markers of progress on a spiritual journey. In this sense, the path is a temporally extended object to be traversed, and the moral agent is the one who traverses it. On the other hand, the path is also an inner phenomenon, an aspect of the

⁵. But not strictly sequential. While the sub-paths identified as comprised by the Bodhisattva path are traversed in sequence, the perfections that are to be cultivated and the attitudes that are dominant on each path are not unique to that path; nor are they completed at the ends of the paths to which they each pertain. So, while generosity, for instance, predominates on the path of insight, it is necessarily practiced before that path is undertaken, and it attains greater perfection on subsequent paths. While merit is accumulated on the first path, it continues to accumulate on subsequent paths. So, while the paths are sequential, the practices, perfections, and results are all interdependent, and the achievement of each facilitates the development of the others.

⁶. Of course there are such inner dimensions to the eightfold path as well, but they occur in the context of explicitly verbal and physical domains as well—the point is that the bodhisattva path is more explicitly inner-directed.
agent herself. That is, the path is itself a quality of mind, a focus on particular traits of character and ways of taking up with the world. Ethical life consists in cultivating these states of mind and modes of engagement.7

We noted earlier the broad sweep of ethics in a Buddhist framework. It is easy to overlook this if, for instance, one translates śīla as ethics in the narrow sense in which that term is generally used in English, and then dismisses, in the context of the eightfold path, the aspects of the path comprised under samādhi and prajñā from the ethical domain. But that is simply an error of translation. Śīla is better translated as proper conduct, indicating action appropriate to one’s status, standing, and circumstances. Ethics, coming from the root ethos, denotes habit, or way of life. Derivatively, of course, it indicates those habits or aspects of life that conduce to making one a better person, a better citizen, and so those aspects of one’s life that are evaluable simply in virtue of one’s humanity. And indeed all aspects of the path, whether the eightfold or the bodhisattva path, satisfy this description. Buddhist paths are paths to a kind of human perfection, and inasmuch as one’s ability to attend, or one’s grasp of the nature of reality, is in part constitutive of one’s perfection or lack thereof, these are all ethical matters.

Buddhist Ethics as Phenomenology

The Mahāyāna understanding of moral life that underpins all Madhyamaka ethical thought is distinctive, and as we have seen, it is different in important respects from many of the accounts of the moral or the exemplary life most familiar in the European tradition. It does not focus in the first instance on obligation; nor does it focus on action; nor again does it focus on states of character manifested in habits; and finally, it does not take as its focus an ideal state, but rather the state of the practitioner in a non-ideal moment. I have argued earlier that it is primarily a phenomenological account of moral life (Garfield 2010/2011, 2012, 2015). While the context for moral discourse is the theory of path, as we

7. It is worth asking at this point whether this sense of “ethical life” makes sense only for a Buddhist, or indeed for a Mahāyāna practitioner, in view of the explicit tie to the Bodhisattva path and the goal of awakening for the benefit of all sentient beings. I think that the answer is a definite “yes and no.” Yes: a Mahāyāna practitioner must be internally committed to the view that the Bodhisattva path is the highest ethical commitment, and so must recognize other ethical commitments as inferior, despite their value and even appropriateness to those who practice them. (And it is important to note that part of path theory is the view that different paths are appropriate to different people, in virtue of different levels of moral and intellectual capacity.) No: the specific traits of character, insights, and commitments identified on the path are largely independent of Buddhist soteriology. And if the ethical perspective articulated in the Mahāyāna is correct, they are valuable to anyone, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, Śrāvakayāna or Mahāyāna.
have seen, the central moral phenomenon in the Madhyamaka tradition is bodhicitta, a term we will leave untranslated. This term is usually translated either as the awakened mind or as the mind of awakening. But that is not very helpful, in part because of the different connotations of citta/sens and mind in Sanskrit/Tibetan and in English philosophical usage, respectively, and in part because of the unclarity of the bare genitive construction in English. A gloss will do better than a translation.

Bodhicitta is a complex psychological phenomenon. It is a standing motivational state with conative and affective dimensions. It centrally involves an altruistic aspiration, grounded in karunā or care—a term we will discuss in more detail below—to cultivate oneself as a moral agent for the benefit of all beings. That cultivation demands the development of the set of skills in moral perception, moral responsiveness, traits of character, and insight into the nature of reality that we have noted in our discussion of the path. This is a transformation so deep that it reconstructs our way of seeing ourselves and others, and issues in a radically new form of what might be called practical wisdom—upāya/thab mkhas, perhaps best translated, following Thurman (1976), as liberative skill. In short, bodhicitta constitutively involves a commitment to attain and to manifest full awakening for the benefit of others. It is the engine of progress on the path, as well as its goal. A bodhisattva is simply one who has cultivated bodhicitta.

Āryadeva is the first Mādhyamika to develop a systematic account of ethics in this sense, and of the cognitive discipline that enables that cultivation. His account is extended and deepened by Śāntideva, and receives careful—if eccentric—exegesis by Candrakīrti, and a systematic treatment much later by rGyal tshab. It is the image of moral life that emerges from the texts composed by this group of philosophers that will concern us, and we will see that this vision of morality is one that takes conventional truth seriously and can itself be taken seriously in the context of conventional truth.

Buddhist ethics, as we have seen, is best conceived as an attempt to solve a deep existential problem—the problem of the ubiquity of suffering—and as an attempt to solve that problem by developing an understanding of our place in the complex web of interdependence (pratītyasamutpāda) that is our world. This is the world of conventional truth itself in the context of which the path to liberation makes sense in the first place. The triune root of suffering is represented in the familiar Buddhist representation of the Wheel of Life with the

8. We must tread with care here, however. Jenkins argues (1998) that “altruism” may be a bit strong, since, as we shall see below, bodhicitta and the motivations and skills connected to it are beneficial to the bodhisattva as well as to others. It is, as Śāntideva will emphasize, always in the end in one’s own interest to cultivate bodhicitta.
pig, snake, and rooster at the hub, the six realms of transmigration representing aspects of the phenomenology of suffering—brutality; pain and despair; insatiable need; arrogance and the need for recognition; insensitivity to the pain of others in our own happiness; and the vulnerability and imperfection that comes with being human—revolving around them, structured by the twelve links of dependent origination (a detailed psychology of perception and action), all of which is depicted as resting in the jaws of death, the great fear of which propels so much of our maladaptive psychology and moral failure. This iconic representation is ubiquitous in Indo-Tibetan Buddhist culture, and serves as a representation of the Buddhist phenomenology of *samsāra*. It represents the starting point of the path to liberation, and represents that path as a path of inner transformation.

Mahāyāna moral theory, per se, is innovative in its reconstruction of the path as an internal sequence of psychological transformations and in the installation of *karuṇā* as the central moral value and the model of the bodhisattva's engagement with the world. *Karuṇā* is not a passive emotional response, and not a mere desire. Instead it is a genuine commitment manifested in thought, speech, and physical action to act for the welfare of all sentient beings, founded upon the insight that suffering is bad, per se, regardless of whose it is.9 We will return to Āryadeva's exposition of the relationship between these ethical commitments and metaphysics below. But first let us consider Sāntideva's account of the rationality of adopting this attitude. We now turn to the important passage in Chapter VIII of *Bodhicaryāvatāra* that we considered in Chapter 4 of this volume, adopting for the purposes of the present chapter what we called there "the rationality reading."

9. This gloss on *karuṇā* is, we must admit, controversial. In much meditational practice devoted to cultivating *karuṇā*, emphasis is placed on the cultivation of affect, as opposed to commitment or action. And so one might conclude that the attitude simply consists in a sympathetic wish that sentient beings be free from suffering and have happiness, to paraphrase a common formula in such meditative traditions. I do, however, think that this is too narrow a reading.

First of all, there is no reason to take the affect or the mere wish as the goal of the meditation that cultivates *karuṇā*, as opposed to an instrument for its cultivation. After all, someone who—however sincerely—mumbles the formula, and who weeps at the woes of sentient beings, but who takes no action at all to alleviate their suffering, even when the opportunity presents itself, has not completed the cultivation of *karuṇā* by anyone's standards.

Second, the etymology of the term itself suggests an internal connection to action, as opposed to mere cognition. While the term is most often translated as compassion, this is a serious error. *Karuṇā* derives from the root *kṛ*, to act, and connotes a commitment to act for the benefit of others; *compassion*, on the other hand, derives from *passio*, to feel. To translate a term so clearly associated with action by one so clearly associated with passivity is seriously misleading.

Finally, we can use a cheap (and admittedly, for a number of reasons, non-demonstrative) argument from authority and note that HH the Dalai Lama frequently glosses the term this way in public teachings in order to distinguish the state from what he often calls in English "mere sympathy."
On this reading, to fail to take another's suffering seriously as a motivation for action is, Śāntideva argues, itself a form of suffering—a kind of mental illness that manifests in irrationality. This irrationality goes beyond the mere "enlightened self-interest" we discuss in Chapter 7, and that may also lie behind the argument from interdependence we develop in Chapter 11. The point is not that I myself would be happier, or have more pleasure, if other sentient beings were happy, and that this responsive pleasure or happiness should be the motive for action. The irrationality at issue, that is, is not the irrationality of acting against my own hedonic self-interest. Instead, Śāntideva thinks, it is the irrationality of failing to be able to give a reason for any distinction between the treatment of similar cases. Once I grasp the fact that suffering is bad, that is by itself a reason for its alleviation. Whose suffering it is is is therefore simply irrelevant.

The central argument in chapter VIII of Bodhicaryāvatāra is presented, as we saw in Chapter 4, in verses 90–103. Here is a recap of what we there called the "rationality reading" of the argument:

VIII.90  "Self and others are the same,"
One should earnestly meditate:
"Since they experience the same happiness and suffering,
I should protect everyone as I do myself."

Here Śāntideva introduces the conclusion: there is no moral or motivational difference between moral subjects. He then offers several arguments or analogies to make this point: First, the ontology that takes individual organisms as the relevant unit of analysis for the purpose of moral assessment of motivation is arbitrary:

VIII.91  Divided into many parts, such as the hands,
The body is nonetheless to be protected as a single whole.
Just so, different beings, with all their happiness and suffering,
Are like a single person with a desire for happiness.

Second, it is not the locus but the fact of suffering that makes it bad. So worrying about whether it is mine or someone else's is simply beside the point:

VIII.92  Even if my own suffering
Does no harm to anyone else's body,
It is still my own suffering.
Since I am so attached to myself it is unbearable.
VIII.93  Just so, even though I do not experience
        The sufferings of others,
        It is still their own suffering.
        Since they are so attached to themselves, it is hard for
        them to bear.

VIII.94  I must eliminate the suffering of others
        Just because it is suffering, like my own.
        I should work to benefit others
        Just because they are sentient beings, as am I.

Third, to single myself out as uniquely deserving of moral concern, or as a
unique source of motivation for action, is arbitrary:

VIII.95  Since I am just like others
        In desiring happiness,
        What is so special about me
        That I strive for my happiness alone?

VIII.96  Since I am just like others
        In not desiring suffering,
        What is so special about me
        That I protect myself, but not others?

VIII.97  If, because their suffering does not harm me,
        I do not protect them,
        When future suffering does not harm me,
        Why do I protect against it?

Fourth, the facts of personal identity militate against egoism. There is no
strict identity relation between successive stages of the continuum I regard
as denoted by "I." So, the fact that I take my future self seriously in practical
reasoning already suggests that I take the welfare or suffering of those not
numerically identical to myself seriously in these ways. It is therefore irrational
to distinguish motivationally between temporally distinct states of my own per-
sonal continuum and states of others' continua.

VIII.98  The idea that this very self
        Will experience that suffering is false:
        Just as when one has died, another
        Who is then born is really another.
VIII.99 If another should protect himself
Against his own suffering,
When a pain in the foot is not in the hand,
Why should one protect the other?

VIII.100 One might say that even though it makes no sense,
One acts this way because of self-grasping.
That which makes no sense with regard to self or to others
Is precisely the object you should strive to abandon!

Finally, and perhaps most germane to the present topic, neither the self nor others, nor the relations of identity or differences among persons, exist ultimately. All are conventional. But that conventional status is not a reason not to take suffering seriously. It is, on the other hand, a reason to take all suffering seriously. Conventional reality is not unreality. It is the only way that things can be real. But once we see that, we see that all suffering has precisely this kind of reality, and hence precisely the same claim on us. Karuṇā, or care, is therefore the only appropriate reaction to the actual mode of existence both of sentient beings and their mode of being in the world. It is the only rational mode of mitsein and hence of dasein.

VIII.101 The so-called continuum and collection,
Just like such things as a forest, or an army, are unreal.
Since the sufferer does not exist,
By whose power does it come about?

VIII.102 As the suffering self does not exist,
There are no distinctions among anyone.
Just because there is suffering, it is to be eliminated.
What is the point of discriminating here?

VIII.103 “Why should everyone’s suffering be alleviated?”
There is no dispute!
If it is to be alleviated, all of it is to be alleviated!
Otherwise, I also am a sentient being!

Karuṇā, grounded in the awareness of our individually ephemeral joint participation in global life, Śāntideva argues, is hence the wellspring of the motivation for the development of all perfections, and the most reliable motivation for morally decent actions. Karuṇā is also, on the Mahāyāna view, the direct result of a genuine appreciation of the essencelessness and interdependence of all sentient beings. And this is so simply because egoism—its contrary—is rational
if, and only if, there is something very special, very independent about the self, something that could justify the distinction between my suffering or well-being and that of others as a motive for action.

Karunā on Śantideva’s account emerges not as a positive phenomenon, but as the absence of the irrational egoism born of taking the self to exist ultimately, and to be an object of special concern, just as emptiness is not a positive phenomenon, but the absence of intrinsic nature. This is why Candrakīrti opens Madhyamakāvatāra by praising karunā as the seed, the rain as well as the harvest, of a bodhisattva’s practice.

This transformation of vision (and consequent transformation of mode of being), even though it both conduces to and issues from a direct understanding of ultimate reality, and an understanding of the relation between this ultimate reality and conventional reality, amounts not to seeing a distinct truly existent reality behind a world of illusion, but rather to coming to see a world about which we are naturally deceived just as it is, not being taken in by the cognitive habits that issue in that deception. In particular, in the ethical domain this transformation amounts to coming to see ourselves as individual sentient beings among multitudes, and our own concerns as minor affairs in the grand scheme of things; it amounts to seeing all beings as equally objects of our rational care.

For this reason, just as the historical Buddha, in the presentation of the eightfold path at Sarnath, emphasized that one’s view of the nature of reality is a moral matter, Śantideva, in his analysis of an awakened life, urges that our metaphysics and epistemology are central to our moral lives. It is the metaphysical and ethical insights at which Madhyamaka is directed that enable us to cultivate the moral vision necessary for karunā. And it is partly for this reason that ethics is so deeply implicated in conventional reality. There is no other reality in which it can be grounded, and all that good metaphysics can ever deliver in the end is a precise understanding of the nature of conventional reality.

Ethics and Conventional Truth: Āryadeva and Candrakīrti

Śantideva inherits this account of ethics as concerning conventional reality, per se, from Āryadeva’s Catuḥsataka, together with Candrakīrti’s commentary. We will approach those texts through rGyal tshab’s commentaries. Candrakīrti in a verse explaining the method of Āryadeva’s treatise, writes:

By explaining the precise mode of existence of the everyday world, The ultimate is gradually presented. (rGyal tshab 50)

10. The parallel of this account to that of Schopenhauer in On the Basis of Morality—perhaps the most unjustly neglected moral treatise in the Western tradition—is intriguing.
rGyal tshab, after a summary of the topics of the first eight chapters, returns to this idea, saying “Therefore, the first eight chapters present the path for maturing the continuum, while the last eight present the path for overcoming negativities and obstructions to wisdom through the presentation of the ultimate truth” (51). Here and in the exegesis that precedes this remark, rGyal tshab emphasizes that the first half of the book, that which deals principally with ethics, as opposed to the metaphysics that underlies it, is not concerned at all with the ultimate truth, but rather with the conventional. rGyal tshab concludes his introduction with a remark on the structure of the text that reinforces this point: “The second part of this treatise, the explanation of the meaning of each of the chapters individually, has two parts: the explanation of the stages of the path according to the conventional truth, and the explanation of the stages of the path according to the ultimate truth” (52). It is clear that the first of these refers to the first eight chapters, those concerned with ethics. The discussion of the ultimate truth in turn provides the deeper analysis that grounds, but does not displace, the ethical discussion.

This reading of Aryadeva’s intention makes good sense. The first chapter of the text is concerned with the importance of cultivating mindfulness of death, and hence of the impermanence of life and the urgency of practice. Aryadeva links moral failure in this chapter to the illusion of immortality, and moral progress to the realization of our finitude. There is no pretense here of attention to emptiness, or that ethics has some transcendent ground; rather, the foundation of ethical consciousness is, according to Aryadeva, squarely in an understanding of the fundamental fact about samsāra: all of us are mortal.

The opening of the second chapter reinforces this location of ethical concern in the conventional realm:

1. Although one might regard the body as an enemy,
   One should care for it.
   By maintaining ethical discipline for a long time
   Great merit is achieved.

rGyal tshab comments (78) that too much attention to impermanence, and to the role of physical attachment in the genesis of suffering, might lead one to deprecate the body, but that one must remember that it is only through the proper use of the body that an agent can perform morally beneficial actions. Of course, this is not, according to Aryadeva or his commentators, a rejection of the body or the pursuit of sensory pleasure as sources of suffering, as the remainder of the chapter makes clear. This is Buddhist ethics, after all. Nonetheless, it is an affirmation of the importance of the mundane in ethics, and of the mundane as the domain of ethical thought.

The third and fourth chapters are devoted to the dangers of sensory attachment and of pride, and the need to abandon them. Once again, the arguments
all concern their deleterious effects on our own psychology—the tendency of attachment to sense pleasure to issue in addiction, narcissism, and frustration, and of pride to undermine our concern for others and our ability to lead a contented life.

In the fifth chapter, we encounter the importance of intention (cetanā/sems) to ethical life.

4. Without intention, such actions as going
   Would therefore not be found to have such characteristics as merit.
   Therefore, in all action
   The mind should be understood to be the most important factor.

5. In the case of bodhisattvas, in virtue of their intentions
   All actions, whether they accord with virtue or vice,
   Are in fact perfectly virtuous.
   This is because they have achieved control over their minds.

This emphasis on intention is important in this context because of the fact that buddhas lack cetanā, in virtue of its conceptual character. Cetanā is central to karmic formation, because our intentions have the greatest effect on who we become. It is therefore important to develop positive intentions, intentions that are morally beneficial. But cetanā is also cognitive, conceptual. Morally positive action, however free from duality we might hope it can become, is hence intentional, hence conceptualized, hence implicated with subject-object duality, objectification, always conditioned by ignorance, and therefore, in the end, with samsāra. Moral action, its basis, and its point, that is to say, are bound to the conventional domain.

Even appropriate conception is conceptual; even positive karma is karma, and a Buddha does not generate karma, does not objectify, does not engage conceptually. A Buddha, therefore, acts without cetanā, non-intentionally. Now a great deal of debate about how to understand the subjectivity and agency of a Buddha without the category of intentionality has been generated by this conundrum (see Griffiths 1994; Siderits 2011; Garfield 2010/2011; Myers 2010). We need not worry

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11. For an exceptionally clear treatment of the role of cetanā in Buddhist theory of action see Myers (2010).

12. This is why the relevant distinction, as is so often the case in Buddhist epistemology, is that between perception and reflection or conceptual thought. When we perceive, we engage directly with particulars, and hence with reality. When we reflect, we conceive, and apprehend unreal universals. For unawakened human beings, the morally salutary finger pointing to the moon of perfection remains, for all that, a finger.

13. Buddhaghosa attempts to resolve the conundrum of a Buddha’s motivation being at the same time intentional but not karmic by introducing a new “neutral kind of intention and karma that characterizes the Buddha’s and arhats’ actions: kiriyakarma or kiriyacetanā, which are neither the fruits of other karma nor generative of future fruits. This karma is also called “path karma” (maggakarma or maggacetanā). This device is used by
about this, as this is not an essay in Buddhology. The point is just this: given the centrality of intention to Madhyamaka ethics, given the conceptual character of intention, and given the fact that conceptuality is bound to the conventional truth, ethics is purely a matter of conventional truth\textsuperscript{14} (see Garfield 2012.)

The sixth and seventh chapters of \textit{Catuhs\text{\-'}ataka} are concerned once again with the abandonment of attachment to the apparent pleasures of sams\text{"}ara. The eighth, the final chapter in the set concerned with ethics, makes the transition from ethics to metaphysics, and lays the foundation for the account of the metaphysical basis of ethical life. Note the following two central verses:

8. Whatever concerns the everyday world
   Is said to involve engagement.
Whatever concerns the ultimate
   Is said to involve relinquishment.

9. When you say "since everything is nonexistent, what's the use?"
   You have become afraid.
   But if actions existed [ultimately],
   This dharma could not engender abandonment.

Engagement is not, \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}ryadeva emphasizes, a bad thing! The entire purpose of ethical training is to facilitate productive engagement with the everyday world, the world we inhabit. Discussion of the ultimate is important as well. But that discussion concerns fruition, the transcendence of the mundane in Buddhahood. That is beyond the level of ethical engagement.\textsuperscript{15} Ethical engagement is, I have been arguing, a matter of pursuit of path, and a Buddha has no need for a path. Action exists

\textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}vasubandhu in \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}bh\text{\-'}karak\text{\-'}a as well. This move to something that is supposed to be just like an intention, directing action to its object, only without objectification or conceptualization, does appear rather desperately ad hoc, only emphasizing the difficulty and the importance of the problem.

\textsuperscript{14} There are two additional points worth making in this context. First, the fact that ethics pertains to the conventional does not mean that in ethics "anything goes." After all, as the Cowherds (2011) are at pains to point out (see esp. chapters 2, 3, 4, 12), the fact that conventional truth is a kind of \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}ruth means that there are standards of correctness and incorrectness within the conventional. This is the heart of Candrak\text{\-'}tr\text{\-'}i's epistemology and metaphysics of the two truths. Just so in the case of ethics: the fact that ethics is bound to conventional truth means that there are, within the bounds of convention, standards of rightness (\textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}amya\text{\-'}).

Second, the fact that ethics is "purely a matter of conventional truth" does not mean that the ultimate truth is \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}relevance. Once again, as the Cowherds were at pains to argue in (2011), the ultimate truth is that the conventional truth is merely conventional. It is not a separate domain. To understand the ultimate truth is to understand the mode of existence of the conventional. It is for this reason that an understanding of emptiness is essential for an understanding of conventional truth. But ultimate truth is unconceptualizable, since all conception is falsifying. And \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}atan\text{\-'}a is conceptual, and fundamental to ethical conduct. Ethical thought is hence bound to conventional truth. But clear ethical thought and motivation in turn therefore require a thorough understanding of conventional truth and hence an understanding of the ultimate.

\textsuperscript{15} Once again, this indicates the para-ethical nature of Buddhahood. After all, one might wonder: Isn't a Buddha \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}fect, and so possessed of all of the perfections? And isn't \textit{\textsc{\text{\-'}}}na one of the perfections? And isn't that ethics? So, how could a Buddha not be supremely ethical? There are two problems with this line of reasoning. First,
only conventionally, and ethics concerns action—physical, verbal, and mental. Dharma is about action, and engenders abandonment—awakening—precisely because it concerns the conventional. So, to say that because the conventional is not ultimately existent, there is no use in taking it seriously is to give up not only on the conventional, but upon the ultimate as well.

Taking Ethics Seriously

Of course Nāgārjuna saw this. He makes the same point in a metaphysical register in *Malamadhyamakakārika* XXIV:

8. The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma
   Is based on two truths:
   A truth of mundane convention
   And an ultimate truth.

9. Those who do not understand
   The distinction between these two truths
   Do not understand
   The Buddha’s profound teaching.

10. Without depending on the conventional truth
    The meaning of the ultimate cannot be taught
    Without understanding the meaning of the ultimate,
    Nirvana is not achieved.

Nāgārjuna here warns against the disparagement of the conventional in favor of the ultimate in the metaphysical domain, and reminds us that the understanding of ultimate truth does not replace, but rather depends upon our grasp of conventional truth. He is, of course, on the way to an account, a few verses later, of the non-duality of the two truths. But at this point, he is emphasizing not their unity, but their difference. The conventional is the domain of conceptual thought, of objectification, of language, and of intention. The ultimate transcends all of that. But one cannot achieve transcendence (especially that transcendence which amounts to a return to immanence) without a firm grasp of the immanent world to be transcended (and reaffirmed).

as we noted earlier, there is the translational problem. If we translate *śīla* not as ethics, but as proper conduct, there is no problem in saying that a Buddha is perfect in *śīla*. His or her conduct is perfectly proper. But second, inasmuch as ethics is concerned with the path to perfection, we can say that a Buddha has accomplished all that ethics is intended to enable. She or he therefore does not continue to practice ethics, but transcends it. The para-ethical is the goal, not the continuation of the ethical.
Aryadeva (and Candrakīrti) are after the same point in the ethical register. We might be tempted to disparage ordinary ethical life, or the ordinary motivations for ethical life—a better life for ourselves and those around us, less suffering, a clearer understanding of reality, the possibility of advancement of our most fundamental projects and values—because all of that is ultimately empty, and because the only real values are unconditional ultimate values.

But that impulse to disparagement must be resisted. And this for two reasons. First, we are on our way to a non-dual understanding of the relation between the ultimate and the mundane, and so to disparage the latter is to disparage the former. But more important, the state of transcendence that one might think can validate all values can only be achieved through conventional engagement in conventional actions, directed by conceptually involved, hence conventional, intention. This is the domain of the path, and this is the domain of ethics. If we disparage this, we have no ethical world left. In the end, a conventional account of ethics, and a conventional ground of ethical motivation must be accepted, simply because that is the only ethical domain that makes any sense.

But this does not amount to an abandonment of a commitment to serious ethical principles, of a distinction between right and wrong, or a descent into trivial relativism. Just as conventional truth requires and enables a distinction between truth and falsity, it enables a distinction between paths that lead to liberation and those that do not, and a distinction between actions, attitudes, and states of character that are consistent with a correct understanding of the world and those that are not. The eightfold noble path is ennobling because of the kinds of beings we are and because of the way the world is, not optionally, not ultimately, but conventionally. The bodhisattva path is the means to cultivate a liberative way of being in the world because of the kinds of beings we are, and because of the nature of reality. Ethical engagement then requires us to take our ultimate nature and the ultimate nature of reality seriously. But to take our emptiness and the emptiness of all around us seriously is to take our conventional reality and the conventional reality of the world seriously. To take the conventional world seriously is to take seriously the distinction between conventional truth and conventional falsehood and to do so in all domains, including the ethical. To take the conventional world seriously is therefore to take ethical considerations to be conventional, and hence to be as serious as any concerns could ever be. In the following chapters, we take these considerations seriously, first considering the object of karuṇā.