# Buddhist Ethics

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## 1. Introduction: Ethics and Interdependence

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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