

Modern Buddhist Ethics in Asia and America

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Needless to say, ethical concerns are at the very forefront of modern Buddhism. Yet, to my knowledge, there is not a single study in print that provides a cross-cultural and/or cross-traditional approach to an investigation of Buddhist ethics. Moreover, as is well known, almost no volumes have appeared in print over the years that treat the general subject of Buddhist ethics either effectively or even ineffectively. S. Tachibana's *The Ethics of Buddhism* was published in 1926 (and reprinted in 1975). Winston King's fine work *In the Hope of Nibbana* was published in 1964, and is now rather outdated. H. Saddhatissa's Theravāda study *Buddhist Ethics* was published in 1970 (and reprinted in 1987). Nonetheless, each of these volumes, valuable in its own right, treats only a small aspect of the Buddhist ethical tradition.

The above does not mean to say that there is no interest in the ethical tradition of Buddhism. Although ethics may never have quite the widespread readers' appeal that the meditative or philosophical traditions garner, it is nevertheless one of the foundations of the Buddhist canon. As such, a number of important articles on the ethical tradition in Buddhism, cross-cultural and cross-traditional in scope, have begun to appear in journals in recent years. Additionally, several very important chapters in various books have also appeared in print recently.

It is my contention that if a quantity of these individual publications in Buddhist ethics were collected and prudently synthesized, a careful survey of the modern Buddhist ethical landscape would emerge that would amply meet the needs of both the scholarly and practicing Buddhist communities. To be sure, such a study could not focus on just one tradition or culture, but would need to

address the broad scope of modern Buddhist cultures and pertinent issues. In other words, while it would be necessary to consider issues of special concern for the Theravāda tradition, it would also be necessary to address Zen ethics, ethical concerns in Tibetan Buddhism, and Chinese Buddhist ethics. Equally, Buddhism in the Western world, particularly Europe and North America, must be included. This is what I propose to do here, albeit in preliminary fashion ... and continue in my book *Buddhist Ethics: A Cross-Cultural Approach* (Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1992).

Until very recently, scholars interested in the ethical dimension of Buddhism had to rely on three basic sources of input for their studies in this area. The first encompasses a rich heritage of monastic disciplinary texts. Although much progress has been made in the last half-century, very few of these texts have been critically edited, and fewer still have been translated into Western languages. I have in mind here such studies as Nathmal Tatia's critical edition of the *Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravādin Prātimokṣa-sūtra*, Gustav Roth's edition *Bhikṣuṇī-Vinaya* (which considers the nun's rules in the same *nikāya*), or my own *Buddhist Monastic Discipline*, which includes translations of two primary Sanskrit *Vinaya* texts. There are even a few secondary works in this area, such as Erich Frauwallner's *The Earliest Vinaya and the Beginnings of Buddhist Literature*, Akira Hirakawa's *A Study of the Vinaya-piṭaka*, and John Holt's *Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinaya-piṭaka*, but these volumes are few and far between. The problem with these texts, apart from philological issues, is that they reveal very much about ancient Buddhism, but very little about the way in which Buddhist ethics adapted to

changing times, circumstances, and cultures. To some degree, the second source of input for scholars alleviated this difficulty, for it provided us with a wealth of commentarial literature.

The commentarial tradition in Buddhist disciplinary literature, however, was vibrant for only a short period, and it is virtually silent in modern times. Additionally, while most of the major Theravādin ethical commentaries have been translated into languages, the larger corpus of texts, in Chinese, Japanese, and especially Tibetan, remains largely untouched and unexplored. Finally, the third source of input for scholars is information concerning the Buddhist laity, but not only is this source utterly scanty, it rests on an ethical framework that has been only minimally reconsidered in the past two thousand years. Thus, as we move into a consideration of Buddhist ethics in the modern world, our scholarship is seriously handicapped.

No doubt, a few scholarly, but general books on Buddhism in the modern world have appeared in recent years, such as *Buddhism in the Modern World*, edited by Heinrich Dumoulin and John Maraldo (1976) and *The World of Buddhism*, edited by Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich (1984), but these books basically ignore the problem of Buddhist ethics. In fact, even those books on modern Buddhism which are case specific to a particular culture and/or heritage basically avoid a consideration of the ethical tradition. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the Tibetan Holocaust and the Vietnam war, Buddhists across the face of the globe are slowly beginning to reconsider their ethical tradition in the context of modernity. In so doing, Buddhism has been forced to confront such vital issues as runaway technology, medical discoveries that require a redefinition of human life and its meaning, political scandal, drug abuse, a pluralistic and highly secularized society, and a host of other variables that demand a reassessment of traditional ethical positions.

Furthermore, Asian Buddhism has begun to

rapidly expand its sphere of influence, and now attracts a large and significant following in Europe and America. To be sure, such an endeavor leads to curious and interesting problems of cultural translocation ... an issue I explored in my (1979) book *American Buddhism*. One profound item that I have found in my continuing research is that some of Buddhism's difficulties in acculturating to America are exacerbated by the rather nebulously defined ethical guidelines of the Buddhist tradition.

Although Buddhism entered America as early as the mid-nineteenth century, it made its greatest advances, numerically and otherwise, in the period from 1950 onward. Indeed, in the 1960s, the entire religious situation in America was in turmoil, prompting Robert Bellah to note: "I would thus interpret the crisis of the sixties above all as a crisis of meaning, a religious crisis, with major political, social, and cultural consequences to be sure."¹ Given the intensified secularization of the 1960s, and its attendant pluralism, America was ripe for Buddhism to advance more fully than it had before. As sociologist Peter Berger notes, "secularization brings about a de-monopolization of religious traditions and thus, *ipso facto*, leads to a pluralistic situation."² This situation was for Berger, and for Buddhism in America, above all a market situation. If the decade of the 1960s can be characterized as perplexing for religion in America, the 1970s and 1980s were no less unusual. Amidst persistent inflation, eroding values, and a growing social anomie, many Americans were faced with a pervasive loss of wholeness, struggling against polarizing forces in virtually every aspect of life. To be sure, the problem is no less severe today. Consequently, as America flexed its collective muscles in the search for human wholeness amidst Theodore Roszak's projected "Wasteland," an overwhelming variety of alternatives appeared in the social, cultural, and religious spheres. In this environment, American Buddhism, despite its apparent ethical insufficiencies, grew

and prospered.

Nonetheless, the above notwithstanding, until quite recently Buddhism's incipient lack of willingness to confront modernity, and its disinclination to redefine its ethical position in the context of rapid social change, has led to serious problems in its Asian homeland. Faced with applying a somewhat outdated and outmoded ethical tradition to modern circumstances or innovating a genuinely new framework which integrates appropriate aspects of its once rich tradition, Buddhists have vacillated. While many religious traditions have taken a long, hard look at the changing face of modern society, and offered to confront the chief ethical issues directly and forthrightly, if not altogether effectively, Buddhists have done neither. Were Buddhists to offer an innovation of the magnitude of Joseph Fletcher's now somewhat outdated situation ethics, it would be hailed as a monumental event. It is my hope that my research in this area will provide modern Buddhists with the information and perspective necessary to achieve that significant and essential goal.

Most modern scholars of Buddhism have argued that salvation in Buddhism is only attainable through the eradication of the defilements (*kleshas*) and focusing especially on greed, hatred, and delusion (*rāga*, *dveṣa*, and *moha*). Noted *Vinaya* scholar G. S. P. Misra, following F. H. Bradley's *Ethical Studies*, claims that religion is basically doing what is moral, and when applied to Buddhism, concludes that it is only through the discipline inherent in the *Vinaya* and *śīla* tradition that this becomes possible.³ The ethical legacy embodied by the *Vinaya* codes and *śīla* guidelines has always been almost exclusively applied to the members of the monastic tradition. This has caused at least one scholar of Buddhist ethics to comment that some scholars "have asserted that the normative ethic of Theravāda Buddhism is one of withdrawal from society and abstention from social involvement."⁴ Additionally:

Some scholars tend to regard the traditional exposition of the teachings in the *Visuddhimagga* (the Path of Purification), authored by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century C. E., as the standard summary of Theravāda Buddhist ethics. The *Visuddhimagga*, however, is a standard text only for the *yogi*, or the monks, who are engaged in spiritual endeavor. Used exclusively, it provides an incomplete and misleading picture of Buddhist ethics. To avoid such misunderstandings, it is best to begin by remembering that the whole of Buddhist ethics is contained in the doctrine of the Middle Way and its prerequisites. This doctrine of the Middle Way teaches that both the extreme of asceticism and the extreme of sensual indulgence are to be avoided In avoiding these two extremes, the extent of the Middle Way is vast, wide, and very flexible, depending on such circumstances as one's point on the path and stage of maturity.⁵

In other words, we must always be cognizant of the fact that the monastic tradition in Buddhism, however important in its capacity as role model for the laity, has never included the majority of Buddhist practitioners. Furthermore, as Phra Rājāvaramuni asserts:

The most basic point to be made about Buddhist social ethics is that in keeping with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising, individual betterment and perfection on the one hand and the social good on the other are fundamentally interrelated and interdependent.⁶

Thus, we must focus clearly on what Ken Jones calls "socially engaged Buddhism."⁷ Socially engaged Buddhism emphasizes alternative societal models, social helping, service, welfare, and radical activism which, according to Jones, culminates

in "societal metamorphosis."⁸ And it is obviously a network composed predominantly of lay Buddhists.

Unquestionably, we must ask whether such a model for socially engaged Buddhism has ever existed in the history of the Buddhist tradition. Winston King thinks not. He says unconditionally that:

To tell the truth the Buddha had little, either concern for society as such or of firm conviction of its possible improvability. . . . This means that Buddhism on the whole has surveyed political forms with supreme indifference. Or perhaps it might be stated better: 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.⁹

Professor Robert Thurman, however, suggests that such a model has existed at least since the reign of the Indian King Aśoka, as evidenced by his various Rock Edicts. He groups the Edicts under five major headings:¹⁰

1. Individual transcendentalism
2. Non-violence
3. Emphasis on education and on religious pluralism
4. Compassionate welfare policies
5. Political decentralization.

Thurman also sees the same model emerging from Nāgārjuna's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels*, approximately five centuries after Aśoka.¹¹ What is significant in the above is that we find parallel patterns in both the early Buddhist and Mahayana delineations of personal and political normative behavior. Further, it is possible to read this progression with clear optimism, as does George Rupp, when he concludes that historical change in Buddhism represents a positive movement, a progression of *saṃsāra* moving toward *nirvana*.¹²

Such statements make it possible to propound, as James Whitehill does for the Zen tradition, that ethics *can be* "a pluralistic process of inquiry into the moral consequences of Zen practice, liberation, and insight"¹³ As such, Whitehill, also hypothesizes that:

While participating in pan-Buddhist ethical dialogue, Zen ethics can consult its own special tradition for confirmed as well as latent ethical insights, offering these insights to the communities where Zen finds itself in the modern world, especially in East Asia and in the Western industrialized world.¹⁴

Needless to say, the issue of how to determine the question of authority is critical. In other words, is it possible to continue to utilize the *Vinaya* and other texts relevant to *śīla* as the basis for determining standards of exemplary, contemporary ethical propriety?

If we acknowledge that the monastic tradition, irrespective of precise location and time, remains almost exclusively an eremitical convention, then we must also acknowledge that the codified texts of the *Vinaya*, with its accompanying commentaries, remain a viable means for effecting ethical correctness in the various communities that define themselves by their isolation from society. Consequently then, we can focus our attention on the laity ... those hundreds of millions of Buddhist individuals who *do not* remove themselves from society and must necessarily confront complex ethical issues and dilemmas on a virtually daily basis.

It is also necessary to concede that modern Buddhism is becoming increasingly urban, even throughout its Asian homeland. This is important to understand, for as Harvey Cox points out:

The religion of *homo urbanitas*, the dweller in the city, is a special kind of religion. Regardless of his or her religious past, once the city really makes its impact on the psyche, any city

person's religion begins to have more in common with that of other city people than it does with the faith of people of his own tradition who still live, either physically or spiritually, in the countryside or small towns.¹⁵

This latter point obviously complicates the entire matter considerably, for it forces modern Buddhist ethics to confront the radical pluralism, and attendant social anomie, that predominates in the city life of its vast majority of adherents.

Whether one considers the *nikāya* Buddhist, Mahayana, or Vajrayāna traditions, and within these either the way of the mendicant (*bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī*), householder (*upāsaka* or *upāsikā*), or bodhisattva, the operative word in a consideration of Buddhist ethics is *śikṣā*, variously rendered as "training," "discipline," or even "morality." On the monastic level, the emphasis on *śikṣā* is evidenced by the inclusion in each version of the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* extant of a section known as the *Śaikṣā* precepts, or those practices (ranging from 66 to 113 in number depending on the text version) aimed at describing and prescribing public, social morality for monks and nuns. On the householder level the laity is conjoined to observe the famous five precepts: (1) to abstain from taking life, (2) not to take that which is not given, (3) to abstain from misconduct in sexual issues, (4) to abstain from incorrect speech, and (5) to abstain from liquor and other intoxicating substances. In each case, the statement of abstention from illicit practice is recorded in a stylized formula that includes the phrase (in Pāli) *sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi*, usually rendered as "I undertake the precept" For the bodhisattva, the clearest statement of and emphasis on *śikṣā* can be found in Śāntideva's famous text known as the *Śikṣāsamuccaya*, a compendium of ethical items focusing on the explication of twenty-seven *kārikās* that provide the framework or superstructure for this entire volume devoted to Mahayana morality.

Were each of the above groups to focus

solely on the notion of *śikṣā* as *precepts*, they would miss the point entirely. In the case of each of the three major traditions of Buddhism, the ethical emphasis is informed by much additional input. In the Theravāda *nikāya*, three additional texts are almost universally cited when dealing with ethical concerns: (1) the *Maṅgala-sutta* of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, (2) the *Metta-sutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, and (3) the *Sigālovāda-sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Of these, the latter offers the most potential input for modern Buddhists. It describes not only the four motives which are inappropriate as bases for action, i.e., impulse (*chanda*), hatred (*dveṣa*), fear (*bhaya*), and delusion (*moha*), but more importantly, it outlines and comments upon specific proper conduct in six types of relationships which predominate in the life of each member of the laity: children and parents, teacher and pupil, husband and wife, friends (i.e., equals), servants and work-people, and monastic and lay-person. While the specifics of this text may be rather dated, outmoded, and perhaps too case specific to the ancient Theravāda tradition, the majority of the relationships and motives for action are not. They are truly trans-temporal and trans-cultural. Unfortunately, they have *not* been utilized as the vehicle for updating and keeping current the mainstream of modern Theravāda ethics, but we shall say more about this later.

In the Mahayana, there is a series of other texts which augments and enhances a purely mechanical exposition of ethics. Here we can cite Śāntideva's additional great work, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (sometimes called the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra*). Lal Mani Joshi refers to this text as a "manual of Buddhist ethical and spiritual culture."¹⁶ Also noteworthy is the *Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra* and the *Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra*, each of which serves the Mahayana tradition as the *Sigālovāda-sutta* serves the Theravāda. Nonetheless, despite their nature as compendiums of Maha-yana ethical life, these texts too have not been fully utilized in bringing

Mahayana ethics into the modern age. Where, then, does this lack up to date textual and/or popular lore leave us in addressing the issue of modern Buddhist ethics in Asia and America, and what is the concomitant prognosis?

In a 1987 paper entitled "The Future of American Buddhism," author Rick Fields (*How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*) commented to a conference on Buddhist-Christian dialogue that Buddhism's future in America was intimately tied up with its ability to develop a *Vinaya* for lay people, its concern for promoting a just and compassionate society, and its regard for identifying an ethical pattern for women.¹⁷ Now Fields is certainly not the first to suggest the above prescriptions,¹⁸ but he is absolutely correct in his assertions. Indeed, his comments *could be* applicable to the world Buddhist situation.

In searching for a contextual basis from which to expand Fields' suggestion into a full-fledged plan of action, one does not have far to look. The *Buddhist tradition itself* offers the most workable methods, needing only some informed synthesis for the production of a viable model. Here I have in mind reliance on two of the most ancient doctrines in the tradition, doctrines that have application across the face of Buddhism, irrespective of cultural and/or sectarian distinctions: the four sublime states and the six perfections. Regarding the former, in 1979 I said (in a slightly different framework) that the Buddhist tradition:

... must more actively incorporate those formulations in the traditional doctrines that are still relevant — or might be made relevant — in the modern world. I have in mind here a return to the practices known as the *Brahmavihāras* or the "divine abodes." These four practices, usually identified as love (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*), when explicated in their totality, are the highest expres-

sion of the Buddhist ethical domain.¹⁹

The precise explication of each of these terms is managed admirably elsewhere.²⁰ However, what is especially worth noting is Harvey Aronson's contention that many scholars have misunderstood the true implications of the term *equanimity*. He says:

... they have assumed that the traditional praise of the *psychological* virtues of the sublime attitude equanimity in meditation prescribe an ethic of neutrality outside of meditation. However, once we have understood that practitioners maintain the practice of all four sublime attitudes even after their enlightenment, it is important to explore just how these attitudes carry over to daily life.²¹

In other words, Aronson criticizes the general scholarly position that equanimity represents some sort of final *detachment*, i.e., the destruction of emotion. In its place, he maintains that an accurate reading of equanimity leads to an altogether different conclusion:

For, although fully liberated beings have abandoned all the negative emotions of attachment, hatred, and delusion, they have not destroyed *all* emotion and feeling. They have the ability to develop a whole range of rich and satisfying emotions and are encouraged in scripture to do so.²²

As such, we have a powerful ethical tool that stands outside of time and culture.

Just as the *Brahmavihāras* are more generally applied to nikāya Buddhist thought, but with *relevance* for Mahayana, the perfections (*pāramitās*) are more generally applied to Mahayana, but with *relevance* for early Buddhism. Thus, it is possible to emphasize the practice of giving (*dāna*), morality (*śīla*), patience (*kṣāntī*), vigor (*vīrya*), medita-

tion (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) not only for those on the bodhisattva path, but for all Buddhists. Recognizing that skillful means (*upāya*) emerges from wisdom:

... we should know that an ethic, especially an ethic viewed as a process of inquiry and as an exercise of humility, is a skillful means, *upāya*. As a tool of wisdom and compassion, an ethic is capable of pointing to special truths, of teasing the ego away from greed and fear, and of drawing us into dialogue and community. An ethic can be a means for directing will and institutions to the issues and realities of suffering.²³

In suggesting the application of the above two doctrines in configuring a modern Buddhist ethics, it must be understood that much traditional material must be *reinterpreted* if the resultant product is to also be new and constructive. As a corollary to the reinterpretation of traditional materials, it is also critical that *completely new commentaries* be forged that will pave the way for the emergence and shaping of a flexible but paradigmatic model of Buddhist ethics. Only then can we say, with John C. Holt, that *Vinaya* texts "reflect a blueprint for transcendence of this world and a strategy for order within this world."²⁴

NOTES

1. Robert N. Bellah, "The New Consciousness and the Crisis in Modernity," in Charles Y. Glock and Robert N. Bellah, *The New Religious Consciousness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 339.

2. Peter L. Berger, *Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 134.

3. G. S. P. Misra, *The Age of Vinaya* (Delhi:

Munshiram Manoharlal, 1972), pp. 79-104.

4. Harvey Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), p. 2.

5. Phra Rājavaramuni, "Foundations of Buddhist Social Ethics," in Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer (eds.), *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), p. 30.

6. *Ibid.* p. 31.

7. Ken Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1989), pp. 216-217.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Winston King, *In the Hope of Nibbana* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1964), pp. 177-178.

10. See Robert A. F. Thurman, "The Politics of Enlightenment," *Lindisfarne Newsletter* 8 (Lindisfarne Association, New York). Some of this material is reprinted in Fred Eppsteiner and Dennis Maloney (eds.), *The Path of Compassion: Contemporary Writings on Engaged Buddhism* (Buffalo: White Pine Press, 1985), pp. 66-72. Also see Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism*, pp. 228-231.

11. See Robert A. F. Thurman, "Guidelines for Buddhist Social Activism Based on Maṅgalajūṇa's *Jewel Garland of Royal Counsels*," *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS 16, 1 (Spring, 1983), pp. 19-51.

12. George Rupp, "The Relationship between Nirvana and Samsara: An Essay on the Evolution of Buddhist Ethics," *Philosophy East and West*, 21 (January, 1971), pp. 61-63.

13. James Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?" *The Eastern Buddhist*, NS 20, 1 (Spring, 1987), p. 19.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

15. Harvey Cox, *The Seduction of the Spirit* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), p. 56.

16. Lal Mani Joshi, *Studies in the Buddhist-*

tic Culture of India (2nd revised edition; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), p. 99.

17. For the published version of this paper, see Rick Fields, "The Future of American Buddhism," *The Vajradhatu Sun*, 9, 1 (October/November, 1987), pp. 1, 22, 24-26.

18. See, for example, Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover: Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984) and Charles Prebish, "Karma and Rebirth in the Land of the Earth-Eaters," in Ronald W. Neufeldt (ed.), *Karma and Rebirth: Post Classical Developments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

19. Charles S. Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, Massachusetts: Duxbury Press, 1979), p. 46.

20. See, for example, Aronson, *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism*, pp. 60-77.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

23. Whitehill, "Is There a Zen Ethic?," p. 20.

24. John C. Holt, *Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapīṭaka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), p. 16.