Text and Tradition in the Study of Buddhist Ethics

Charles S. Prebish
Pennsylvania State University

As I have noted elsewhere, relative to other areas of inquiry in Buddhist Studies, apart from S. Tachibana’s *The Ethics of Buddhism* (published in 1926), Winston King’s *In the Hope of Nibbana* (published in 1964), and H. Saddhatissa’s *Buddhist Ethics* (published in 1970), until quite recently there has been very little scholarly publication in the area of Buddhist ethics. Frank Reynolds’ useful (and now updated) “Buddhist Ethics: A Bibliographic Essay,” illustrates the same point. My own concern for this dilemma has been expressed by, and expanded upon, by Damien Keown in his excellent book *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. He states,

The study of Buddhist ethics has been neglected not just by the tradition but also by Western scholarship. Recent decades have witnessed an explosion in all aspects of Buddhist studies while this fundamental dimension of the Buddhist ethos, which is of relevance across the boundaries of sect and school has become an academic backwater. Only recently have the signs appeared that this neglect is to be remedied...

Besides Keown’s work, the only full-length study that moves even nominally beyond this limitation is G.S.P. Misra’s *Development of Buddhist Ethics*, published in 1984.

The topic of Buddhist ethics, though, has become sufficiently timely and consequential that it now provides the occasion for sponsoring international conferences. In 1990, the first Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies International Conference on Buddhism was organized by its director, Venerable Sheng-Yen, and convened at Taipei’s National Central Library with “Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society” as its
essential focus. The papers presented at the conference were collected into a volume entitled *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, edited by Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Sandra A. Wawrytko. It is perhaps the most useful of all recent books on the subject due to the breadth and scope of its twenty-nine papers spanning the past, present and future. The success of the initial conference enabled the Chung-Hwa Institute to hold a second conference in Summer 1992.

Venerable Sheng-Yen, in the *Prologue* to *Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society*, says “The precepts (Vinaya) form the basis of Buddhist ethics.” He goes on to say that “Buddhist lay members need obey only 5, or at the most 8, Buddhist novices must obey 10, while adult monks and nuns have to obey anywhere from 250 to more than 300.” Although Sheng-Yen is wrong in not distinguishing the basis of ethical conduct for the laity as separate from the monastic code of the Vinaya, a traditional association in East Asian Buddhism where the terms śīla and Vinaya are compounded, his mistake is rather commonly made even the Indian tradition where the terms are indeed separate and never compounded. Akira Hirakawa has offered considerable insight on the need to separate the traditional compound śīla/vinaya into its component parts for a proper understanding of each term, but it is rather ordinary and regular, I think, for scholars to associate Vinaya rather than śīla with ethics.

It is critical for our study to understand why the distinction between these terms is so important, and precisely how the distinction impacts on our original topic. The technical term Vinaya, derived from the Sanskrit prefix *vi* + *ṇa*, is often rendered as (some variant of) training, education, discipline, or control. John Holt, utilizing another etymologically valid approach suggests “Vinaya, the reified noun form of the verb *vi* + *ṇa* therefore leads us to the general meaning of ‘that which separates,’ or ‘that which removes.’” Holt goes on:

> Our translation of the term vinaya begs the question: what is being removed? To answer that question in the simplest terms, that which is being removed are wrong states of mind, the conditions of grasping, desire and ignorance which stem from the delusion that we have a ‘self’ that can be satiated. The discipline of the Vinayapitaka represents a systematic assault on the idea of ‘ego-consciousness.”

Charles Wei-hsun Fu, utilizing Hirakawa’s etymological analysis which captures the essence of both meanings cited above, comes to the same conclusion: “Vinaya referred to the established norms of the Sangha that all members were expected to observe to maintain the monastic order and insure its continuation.” In other words, the Vinaya was as much concerned with the pariśuddhi or complete purity of the community,
individually and organizationally, as it was with the specifics of ethical conduct. Under no circumstances should we presume that ethical concerns were superseded in the Vinaya, but rather were included in a series of tiered concerns that focused on institutional, but not exclusively, ethical conduct.

śīla, more difficult etymologically than Vinaya, is probably derived from the verb śīlā and generally translated as virtue, moral conduct, morality, or some similar variant (although Buddhaghosa in the Visuddhimagga traces it to a different verb root, associated with “cooling” and Vasubandhu in the Abhidharmakośa suggests it derives from the verb śīlā, which he too associates with cooling). As such, it is a highly ethical term, almost exclusively applied to the individual, and referenced to his or her self-discipline. Additionally, one finds such references continually in the literature. Unlike the Vinaya, which is externally enforced, śīla refers to the internally enforced ethical framework by which the monk or nun structures his or her life. Taken in his light, we can see that śīla is an incredibly rich concept for understanding individual ethical conduct. Thus, as Fu points out, with respect to śīla and Vinaya:

Hirakawa’s analysis of the two words seems to have enormous significance for Buddhist ethics and morality, to address the task of its constructive modernization, demands that we give serious consideration to the means for maintaining a balance between autonomy (śīla) [sic], expressing the inner spirit of Dharma, and the heteronomous norms or precepts (vinaya) of the Buddhist order.

Although the Sūtravibhaṅga and its paracanonical precursor, the Prātimokṣa (that portion of the Vinaya Piṭaka devoted to precepts for the individual monks and nuns), contain many rules reflective of significant ethical awareness and concern, is it appropriate to identify the Sūtravibhaṅga as an exclusively ethical document? If we could establish that the canonical Vinaya texts, of which the Sūtravibhaṅga is a critical part, have their basis in the precepts of śīla, then such an argument might be well taken. In this regard, one of the pioneers of comparative Prātimokṣa study, W. Pachow, argues for precisely that position in asserting that the Buddhist disciplinary code was little more than an embellishment of the traditional, widely known, and quite early, pañcaśīla or five ethical precepts. Pachow says,

It would not be unreasonable to say that the code of discipline of the Samgha is but an enlarged edition of the Pañcaśīla which have been adopted by the Buddhists and the Jains from the Brāhmanical ascetics. And under various circumstances, they developed subsid-
He then attempts to identify a clear developmental relationship between the individual precepts of the pāṇḍita and the lesser, secondary rules of the Prātimokṣa. Pachow’s interesting approach is cited by most scholars researching the problem. Holt, for example, says, “If this hypothesis were absolutely sound, we could somehow relate all of the disciplinary rules in some way to the four pāṭajikas or to the pāṇḍita. Unfortunately, we are not able to do this.” Using the Pāli text as the benchmark, 139 of the 227 Patimokkha rules can be explained. Nonetheless, eighty-eight rules cannot be reconciled! Undaunted, Pachow simply creates new categories to accommodate them. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the pāṇḍita largely mirror the rules for Brahmansical ascetics and Jain monks. Holt summarizes well:

Thus, if we are to argue that the fundamental basis of Buddhist discipline consists of the primary concerns of śīla, we would have to admit that the basis of Buddhist discipline is not exclusively Buddhist, nor śramaṇic, nor even monastic for that matter: not a very satisfying finding.

In the beginning of his important chapter on “Aspects of Śīla” in The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, Damien Keown clearly identifies the impact of the above argument: “Overall, there seems to be no reason to assume that the Vinaya is either derived from a simpler set of moral principles or founded upon a single underlying principle or rationale.” The remarks of Holt and Keown mirror what Prebish said rather directly in 1980: the “Prātimokṣa is not just monastic ‘glue’ holding the samgha together, but the common ground on which the internally enforced life of śīla is manifested externally in the community.” More recently, and aggressively, Lambert Schmithausen has made the same point. He notes, “The Vinaya is not concerned, primarily, with morality proper but rather with the internal harmony and external reputation of the Order.” He goes on to say, “One of the main purposes of the Patimokkha (though some of its prohibitions do also refer to morality proper) is no doubt, besides internal harmony, the correct and decorous behaviour of the Order and its members in society.” If Upāli’s recitation of the first council of Rājagrha has as much to do with communal administration and conduct as it does with individual moral behavior, and if the canonical Vinaya Piṇḍaka, even in the Suttavibhāṅga, devotes more than one-third of its regulations to matters that could at best be referred to as etiquette, where, if anywhere in the Buddhist cannon, can we find a
fuller exegesis of śīla, acknowledged to be a more comprehensive, apt, and better descriptive term for Buddhist ethical concerns than Vinaya? Further, although the commentarial tradition associated with the Vinaya presents an immense literature in Pāli, replete with tikās, sub-tikās, and the like, it remains somewhat limited in scope with regard to more modern issues. Thus, it becomes necessary to question whether it is possible for the textual material on śīla to be functional in a transtemporal and transcultural fashion?

If we acknowledge that the most general and consistent treatment of ethics in Buddhism is revealed by its expositions on śīla, then it also becomes critical for an accurate understanding of Buddhist ethics to ask the question clearly put by Winston King in 1964: “What is the relation of ethics to the total structure of Buddhist doctrine and practice, particularly with regard to the definition of moral values, their metaphysical status if any, and the nature of ultimate sanctions.”

The traditional way of expressing King’s question considers the relationship between the three aspects of the eightfold path, śīla, samādhi, and prajñā, and their connection to nirvāṇa. Damien Keown reviews several long-standing notions on how these soteriological elements relate. Keown first cites the most common view that śīla leads to samādhi which leads to prajñā, and that prajñā is identified with nirvāṇa. In this context, the ethical concerns expressed by śīla are at best subsidiary to the others, and are generally thought to be transcended with the attainment of nirvāṇa. Secondly, it may be argued that ethical enterprise may facilitate enlightenment, and following the attainment of nirvāṇa, once again become operative. Thirdly, ethics and knowledge (i.e., prajñā) may both be present in the attainment of the final goal. About his review Keown concludes:

The three possibilities outlined above represent very different visions of the role of ethics in the Buddhist soteriological programme. In the first two cases, which I have bracketed together, ethics is extrinsic to nibbāna, dispensable, and subsidiary to paññā. In the third it is intrinsic to nibbāna, essential, and equal in value to paññā.

Although the prevailing viewpoint in Buddhist scholarship has tended toward a utilitarian conclusion on the issue of śīla, especially with regard to Theravāda studies, and despite the contrariness of Mahāyāna-based testimony, an ever-increasing volume of new scholarship has rejected the so-called “transcendency thesis,” in favor of a more valued role for those practices collected under the categorical term śīla. In so doing, it becomes possible to consider those principles categorized as śīla collectively, as a synthetic reflection of both nikaya Buddhism and Mahāyāna, and perhaps to at least reconsider, and at most dispel, such notions as
śīla representing a purely mundane goal, largely considered as the highest pursuit for the laity, and practiced by monks and nuns only as a preparation for samādhi.

Although the transcendency thesis was advanced as early as 1914,²⁷ Winston King's *In the Hope of Nibbana* (1964) and Melford Spiro's *Buddhism and Society* (1970) offer the clearest exposition of the argument. The argument is simple and straightforward. Using Spiro's terminology, *Nibbanic* Buddhism involves *monks* pursuing the goal of *nibbāna* by destroying *kamma* through *bhāvana* or meditative discipline, while *Kammatic* Buddhism involves *lay practitioners* pursuing the goal of *favorable rebirth* through the production of *puñña* or merit by acts of *dana* (giving) and *śīla* (morality). The theory is largely based on the well-known "Parable of the Raft," taken from the *Alagaddūpama-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* ("Discourse on the Parable of the Water-Snake"). I.B. Horner, in her translation, understands the raft parable to establish that morality is left behind upon the attainment of *nibbāna*. It is curious that she and others overlook further passages in the *Nikāyas* which *contradict* the transcendency thesis by clearly stating that *śīla* is *part* of the *farther shore*.²⁸ A similar, contrary position is advanced in the *Mahāsānkhaya-sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* (and affirmed by *Buddhaghosa* in his Commentary) in which Buddha addresses the issue of clinging to the Dhamma as opposed to the issue of whether *śīla* is transcended.²⁹ Coupled with additional evidence provided by Aronson in *Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism* and Katz in *Buddhist Images of Human Perfection*,³⁰ the King-Spiro approach is rather clearly contradicted. If we summarize the relationship between *śīla*, *samādhi*, and *prajñā*, it becomes possible to delineate a clear and precise connection:

The fact that the Eightfold Path begins with *śīla* does not mean that morality is only a preliminary stage. The Eightfold Path begins with *śīla* but ends with *śīla* and *paññā*. *Śīla* is the starting point since human nature is so constituted that moral discipline (*śīla*) facilitates intellectual discipline (*paññā*). Until correct attitudes, habits, and dispositions have been inculcated it is easy to fall prey to speculative views and opinions of all kinds. This does not mean that there is a direct line leading through *śīla* to *paññā*, or that morality is merely a means of limbering up for the intellectual athlete. No: morality is taken up first but constantly cultivated alongside insight until the two fuse in the transformation of the entire personality in the existential realisation of selflessness.³¹

Finally, the author of the above quotation integrates the role of *samādhi* in the progression as well. He says, "In the scheme of the Eightfold Path,
samādhi stands between sīla and pañña and supplements them both. It is a powerful technique for the acceleration of ethical and intellectual developments towards their perfection in nibbāna.\textsuperscript{32}

Having established the efficacy of sīla rather than Vinaya as the primary and most essential category of inquiry for matters pertinent to the ethical tradition in Buddhism, and having established sīla as critical throughout the Buddhist path to enlightenment and after its attainment, we can now proceed to an examination of the sūtra, and to a lesser extent, Abhidharma literature fundamental to the sīla tradition.

The clearest and most detailed exposition of sīla in the Pāli Canon can be found in the first thirteen suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, a section collectively referred to as the Silakkhandhavagga. The first, and perhaps most important of these thirteen texts cited above, is the Brahmajāla-sutta or the "Discourse on Brahma's Net." The preliminary, critical portion of this text is divided into three sections termed, respectively, the short (cūla), medium (mañjihima), and long (maha) divisions. These three sections occur in each of the thirteen suttas of the Silakkhandhavagga! Thomas W. Rhys Davids, in the notes to his translation of these sections of the Dīgha Nikāya, refers to them as the "Sīla Vagga," and says that "the tract itself 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."\textsuperscript{33} The short tract (as Rhys Davids calls the division) contains twenty-six items of moral conduct, the medium tract ten, and the long tract seven, and while each tract is important for understanding the developing notion of Buddhist morality, it is the short tract that is most critical. Compared to the various codes of precepts that have become the standard of proper Buddhist conduct, namely, the (in Pāli) pañcaśīla (five precepts), aṭṭhāṅgasīla (eight precepts), daśasīla (ten precepts), daśakusalakammapiṭaka (ten good paths of action), and Pātimokkha (formal monastic disciplinary code), one can correlate four of the five pañcaśīla to the short tract, seven of the eight aṭṭhāṅgasīla, nine of the ten daśasīla, seven of the ten daśakusalakammapiṭaka, and, as we have seen above, 139 of the 227 offenses of the Pātimokkha. This close correspondence is important because "...the conduct of the ideal samana as defined in the Short Tract becomes the foundation of Buddhist ethics."\textsuperscript{34} Although the Brahmajāla-sutta is possibly the clearest exposition of all the discourses in the Sīla Vagga, a number of other texts are also especially important for understanding sīla in a contextual framework consistent with Buddhist soteriology. The Sāmaññaphala-sutta or "Discourse on the Fruits of the Religious Life," for example, links the practice of sīla to meditative attainment, destruction of the imperfections known as āsavas (usually translated as "outflows" or "cankers"), and the achievement of arhanthood. The famous eightfold path, with its division into sīla, samādhi, and pañña, is mentioned in the Mahāli-sutta ("Discourse to Mahāli") and the
Kassapasthanāda-sutta ("Discourse on the Lion's Roar to Kassapa"). Nor should we conclude that ethicality is not emphasized in the other parts of the canon, as the Mangala-sutta of the Khuddhaka Nikāya, Metta-sutta of the Suttanipāta, and Sigalovāda-sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya are among the most important Theravāda texts on this subject.

It would also be incorrect to presume śīla as topically important only in the sūtras. It is also of much interest to Abhidharma and later commentarial authors as well. Nowhere is this more plainly visible than the Theravādin Abhidhamma, the first text of which (i.e., the Dhammasaṅgani) classifies mental elements around a markedly ethical base. According to G.S.P. Misra, to Puggalapaññātī as well "deals with the task of the classification of human types in which ethical consideration, among others, is the most dominant principle." Anuruddha's Abhidhammattha-sangaha offers a list of fourteen immoral and nineteen moral mental constituents (cetasikas). Additionally, ethical concerns abound in the appropriate sections of Buddhaghosa's Visuddhimagga and virtually throughout the Milindapañha. In the Sarvāstivādin tradition too, twenty-eight of the forty-six caittas have clear ethical import: ten positive mental constituents known asuṣala-mahābhūmika-dharmanes and eighteen negative mental constituents (composed of six klesas or defilements, two asuṣala-mahābhūmika-dharmanes or universally bad elements, and ten upakleśas or secondary defilements). The ethical considerations in Vasubandhu’s Abhidharmakośa are simply too numerous to cite. What it boils down to is this: "The Abhidharma posits two classes of mental forces which produce either defilement or purification of the mind."

How does the above present a consistent, harmonious picture for the early Buddhist? In the Kassapasthanāda-sutta, Buddha says, of his own ethical attainment:

Now there are some recluse and Brahmans, Kassapa, who lay emphasis on conduct. They speak, in various ways, in praise of morality. But so far as regards the really noble, the highest conduct, I am aware of no one who is equal to myself, much less superior. And it is I who have gone the furthest therein; in the highest conduct (of the Path).

Of course the Pali word utilized to indicate “highest conduct” is adhisthā. The implication of Buddha's statement is clear enough: Buddha's attainment was unquestionably motivated by compassion and fueled by moral development of the highest order, but also that the attainment of Buddhahood (or, for that matter, arhatship) does not preclude ethical propriety. No doubt the cultivation of meditational attainment, as we indicated earlier, bridges the proverbial gap between śīla and pañña,
and not only does this suggest that meditational experience has serious impact on the moral life, but also that “Śīla is a central feature of the conduct of the enlightened...” Keown notes that “the Arahant certainly has not gone beyond kusala, and kusala is the term which par excellence denotes ethical goodness.” Ethical goodness, as manifested by Buddha or any serious practitioner, is a reflection of his sympathy (anukampa) for all sentient beings and manifested by cultivation of the four brahmavihāras or “Divine Abodes,” as Aronson has amply demonstrated.

If the above paragraph demonstrates that Buddhist ethical development takes its inspiration from Buddha’s personal example, it is not unreasonable to conclude about the Buddha, as Lal Mani Joshi does, that

His love of solitude and silence was matched only by his universal compassion towards the suffering creatures. Hīnayāna seems to have laid emphasis on the former while Mahāyāna on the latter aspect of the Buddha’s personality and ideal.

Such an approach lead Joshi and others to identify the ethical approach of the Buddhist nikāyas as narrower and more limited in scope than Mahāyāna. About Mahāyāna, Joshi remarks, “Its aim is higher, its outlook broader, and its aspiration more sublime than that of Hīnayāna.” One should not read Joshi’s evaluation too aggressively, or as a rejection of the earlier understanding of Āśīla, but rather as what Keown aptly calls a “paradigm shift.” This paradigm shift is of course reflected by the Mahāyāna emphasis on the bodhisattva ideal.

Nalinaksha Dutt, in his still important Aspect of Mahāyāna Buddhism and Its Relation to Hīnayāna, notes that the Chinese pilgrim I-ching “who was chiefly interested in the Vinaya, remarks that the Mahāyāna had no Vinaya of their own and that theirs was the same as that of the Hīnayānists.” Dutt, however, goes on to list a large number of Mahāyāna sūtras that deal with ethical issues, including the Bodhisattva-pācayānirdesa, Bodhi-sattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra, Bhikṣu Vinaya, Akāśagarbha-sūtra, Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra, Ugradattaparipṛcchā-sūtra, Ratnamegha-sūtra, and Ratnarāsi-sūtra. Of these, the Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra and the Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra are clearly the best known. The former was edited by Dutt and published in Indian Historical Quarterly, 7 (1931), pp. 259-286, but to my knowledge, has never been translated into English. It is a sūtra only in name, comprised primarily of fragments taken from the Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra and the Bodhisattavabhumi. Nonetheless, it is not a code of monastic rules for bodhisattvas, as its name implies, but rather a general ethical guide for both lay and monastic bodhisattvas. The Upāliparipṛcchā-
There is little doubt that at least three major texts form the basis of Mahāyāna ethics: the (1) (Mahāyana) Brahmacāla-sūtra, an apocryphal Chinese work\(^5\) (2) Śikṣāsamuccaya of Śantideva, and (3) Bodhicaryāvatāra of Śantideva. The Śikṣāsamuccaya was of sufficient importance to prompt Joshi to state, “The fundamental principle of Mahāyāna morality is expressed in the first verse of the Śikṣāsamuccaya: ‘When to myself as to my fellow-beings, fear and pain are hateful, what justification is there that I protect my own self and not others?’”\(^5\)

Structurally, the text is organized into three parts, beginning with twenty-seven kārikās outlining the ethical ideal of the bodhisattva. A second part offers an extensive commentary on these verses, with the third part offering a huge compendium of supporting quotations from additional Buddhist texts. Taken collectively, its three parts form a comprehensive statement on bodhisattva ethics. The Bodhicaryāvatāra is possibly the best known Mahāyāna text associated with the conduct of the bodhisattva. It is arranged in ten chapters, five of which address the pāramitās, but with mindfulness (smṛti) and awareness (samprajñā) substituted for the traditional dāna and śīla. This does not mean say that the śīla-pāramitā is omitted, for Chapter V, Verse 11 mentions it by name.\(^5\)

Specifically ethical concerns are also considered in Chapter II, Known as “Pāpa-deśanā” or “Confession of Evil.” Overall, an incredible breadth and scope of ethical issues are considered.

Curiously, it is not from these famous Mahāyāna ethical texts alone that we find the key which unlocks the major emphasis of bodhisattva conduct. Two further texts are critically important here: the Mahāyānasamgraha and the Bodhisattvabhūmi, and it is on the basis of their evidence that many authors, Buddhist and otherwise, have advanced the theory of the superiority of Mahāyāna ethics over that of nikāya Buddhism. In fact, the tenth or “ethical” chapter of the Bodhisattvabhūmi was the focus of a complete translation and study by Mark Tatz.\(^5\)

Keown, in *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (pp. 135-157), provides an extremely careful exposition of the argument. The Mahāyānasamgraha suggests that Mahāyāna morality is superior to Hinayāna in four ways: (1) in its classifications (prabheda-viṣeṣa), (2) in its common and separate rules (sādārāṇa-asādārāṇa-śikṣāviṣeṣa), (3) in breadth (vaipulaviṣeṣa), and (4) in depth (gāmbhīryaviṣeṣa).\(^5\)

The first category is the most important of the four since it supports the other three, and is itself composed of three sections: (a) morality as temperance (sāmvarā-śīla), (b) morality as the pursuit of good (kūśala-dharma-samgrāhaka-śīla), and (c) morality as altruism (sattva-artha-kriya-śīla).\(^5\) The threefold categorization of morality as temperance, the pursuit of good, and
Prebish: Study of Buddhist Ethics

altruism is further developed by the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*, concluding that it is the element of altruism that enables Mahāyāna morality to surpass its nikāya Buddhist counterpart. The extreme importance of the issue of altruism in asserting the superiority of Mahāyāna ethics has not gone unnoticed by modern Theravādins. Walpola Rahula, for example, says,

> The bhikkhu is not a selfish, cowardly individual thinking only of his happiness and salvation, unmindful of whatever happens to the rest of humanity. A true bhikkhu is an altruistic, heroic person who considers others' happiness more than his own. He, like the Bodhisattva Sumedha, will renounce his own nirvāṇa for the sake of others. Buddhism is built upon service to others.

Other Theravādin authors echo Rahula’s sentiment. Regarding the specific conduct of bodhisattvas, the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* postulates a code having fifty-two rules, of which only the first four are categorized (as *pāratayika-sthāniyā-dharma*) and a number of which allow the violation of (some of) the ten good paths of action. The second category explores the differentiation between serious and minor offenses, emphasizing that while both bodhisattvas and Śrāvakas are enjoined to observe all the major rules of conduct, bodhisattvas may breach minor matters of deportment while Śrāvakas may not. Of course the circumstances under which a bodhisattva may engage in this kind of behavior are also stated. The third category is essentially a summary. Finally, the fourth category is the most innovative, focusing on the notion of skill-in-means (*upaya-kausalya*) in relation to Mahāyāna ethics.

In the fourth chapter of the *Bodhicaryavatāra*, one reads “The son of the Conquerer, having grasped the Thought of Enlightenment firmly, must make every effort, constantly and alertly, not to transgress the discipline (śikṣā).” In the next chapter: “Thus enlightened, one ought to be constantly active for the sake of others. Even that which generally is forbidden is allowed to the one who understands the work of compassion.” How can these two conflicting views appear in the same text, and in such close proximity? The answer lies in a proper understanding of *upaya-kausalya* and its role in Mahāyāna ethics: it is a theme that permeates Śāntideva’s writings. Throughout the eighth chapter of the *Śiksāmauccaya* on “Purification from Sin” (Pāpasodhanam), citations abound, especially from the *Upālipariprccchā-sūtra* and the *Upāyakausalya-sūtra*, in which ethical transgressions are allowed and sanctioned in the name of skill-in-means. Keown concludes from all these examples “that the freedom allowed to a bodhisattva is enormous and a wide spectrum of activities are permitted to him, even to the extent of taking life.” He goes on, however, to say:
When actions of these kinds are performed there are usually two provisos which must be satisfied: (a) that the prohibited action will conduce to the greater good of those beings directly affected by it; and (b) that the action is performed on the basis of perfect knowledge (prajñā) or perfect compassion (karuṇā).

The relationship between śīla and prajñā in Mahayana is thus parallel to that noted above with respect to nikāya Buddhism in which it was remarked that “the two fuse in the transformation of the entire personality in the existential realization of selflessness” (see note 31). What seems not to be parallel is that the nikāya Buddhist adept is at no time allowed to breach the practice of proper morality while the Mahāyāna bodhisattva may, under certain circumstances invariably linked to altruistic activities and based on karuṇā, upāya-kauśalya, and prajñā, transcend conventional morality. G.S.P. Misra, for example, notices that, “In the Bodhisattvabhūmi we find an enumeration of the circumstances under which a Bodhisattva may justifiably commit transgressions of the moral precepts; the governing factor, however, is always compassion and a desire to save others from sinful acts.”

The above passages notwithstanding, parallel references can also be found emphasizing a strict observance of the precepts for bodhisattvas. As a result, we find ourselves confused over the apparent incongruity in the textual accounts of Mahāyāna ethical conduct, and wondering just how breaches of conventional ethical behavior are sanctioned.

The solution emerges from the postulation of two uniquely different types of upāya-kauśalya. About the first, which he categorizes as normative ethics and calls upāya1, Keown says:

*Upāya1* does not enjoin laxity in moral practice but rather the greater recognition of the needs and interests of others. One’s moral practice in now for the benefit of oneself and others by means of example. Through its emphasis on karuṇā the Mahāyāna gave full recognition to the value of ethical perfection, making it explicit that ethics and insight were of equal importance for a bodhisattva.

The second type of upāya has nothing to do with normative ethics or ordinary individuals. It is the province of those who have already perfected ethics and insight. Thus:

... it is the upāya of bodhisattvas of the seventh stage (upāya-kauśalya-bhūmi) and beyond, whose powers and perfections are supernatural. *Upāya*, is depicted as an activity of the Buddhas and Great Bodhisattvas (Bodhisattva-Mahāsattvas) and it is only they who have the knowledge and power to use it. It is by virtue of upāya2
that bodhisattvas transgress the precepts from motives of compassion and are said to do no wrong.\textsuperscript{66}

There can be little doubt that up\textit{ā}ya\textsubscript{2} is \textit{not} the model by which ordinary beings perfect themselves but rather the pragmatic moral outcome of the attainment of the seventh stage of the bodhisattva path. Up\textit{ā}ya\textsubscript{2} is the social expression of a genuine understanding of the notion of emptiness (\textit{sānyāta}) in which no precepts can even be theorized. It is emphasized throughout the Mahāyāna literature on emptiness, but nowhere as eloquently as in the discourse between Vimalakīrti and Upāli in the third chapter of the \textit{Vimalakīrtinirdesā-sūtra}.

Reverend Upāli, all things are without production, destruction, and duration, like magical illusions, clouds, and lightning; all things are evanescent, not remaining even for an instant; all things are like dreams, hallucinations, and unreal visions; all things are like the reflection of the moon in water and like a mirror-image; they are born of mental construction. Those who know this are called the true upholders of the discipline, and those disciplined in that way are indeed well disciplined.\textsuperscript{67}

As such, it represents the far extreme of the ethical continuum, a Buddhist situation ethics established not simply on love, as in Fletcher's system, but on the highest and most profound manifestation of compassion.

Having concluded in the above pages that śīla is operative throughout the individual's progress on the nīkāya Buddhist path, even after the attainment of \textit{prajñā}, and that the same claim can be made for Mahāyāna, enhanced by the altruistic utilization of up\textit{ā}ya\textsubscript{2} up to the attainment of the seventh bodhisattva stage, after which up\textit{ā}ya\textsubscript{2} becomes operative, albeit in rather antinomian fashion, it now becomes important to address the issue of whether textbook based Buddhist ethics can be truly current; whether an ethical tradition solidly grounded on the textual heritage can serve as the foundational basis for a socially engaged Buddhism, effective in addressing the complex concerns cited in the growing literature on the subject.

The relative vitality of Buddhist ethics in today's world is a concern that cannot be minimized. Indeed, Kōshō Mizutani, in the \textit{Prologue to Buddhist Ethics and Modern Society} asserts, "I submit that a study of Buddhism that emphasizes its ethical aspects will be the most important task facing Buddhists in the twenty-first century."\textsuperscript{68} Studies abound stressing the difficulties of living effectively in a postmodern society that is becoming increasingly pluralistic and secular. This dilemma is further exacerbated for Buddhists in that "Buddhists today
face the question not only of how to relate to other religions, but also how to relate to other forms of Buddhism from different traditions. In 1987, Rick Fields delivered a paper on "The Future of American Buddhism" to a conference entitled "Buddhism and Christianity: Toward the Human Future," held at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Although case specific to the American Buddhist situation, Fields concluded his presentation with a sketch of eight features he felt would be critical in the on-going development of American Buddhism. All eight points were directly or indirectly related to issues of Buddhist ethics, prompting Fields to comment: "The Bodhisattva notions of direct involvement in the world will tend to overshadow tendencies towards renunciation and withdrawal. Buddhist ethics, as reflected in the precepts, the paramitas, and the Bodhisattva vow, will be applied to the specific problems of day-to-day living in contemporary urban North America." It is difficult to consider Fields' words, and those of similar, like-minded individuals such as the contributors to works in the genre of The Path of Compassion edited by Fred Eppsteiner without feeling much sympathy for the predicament facing Buddhists in Asia and America as they try to confront ethical dilemmas directly. Consequently, when we read articles by Sulak Sivaraksa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Jack Kornfield, Joanna Macy and others we must commend them for the depth of their sincerity and commitment, the expanse of the timely issues they confront, and wonder why there is rarely a footnote, hardly a textual reference in their writings which might provide additional and persuasive authority to their arguments.

In an exciting new article, drawing heavily on the work of recent biblical scholarship, Harold Coward points out that

The relationship between a religious community and its scripture is complex, reciprocal and usually central to the normative self-definition of a religion. The awareness of this relationship is the result of postmodern approaches that no longer see scriptures as museum pieces for historical critical analysis, but recognize them to be the products of human perception and interaction—both in their own time and in today's study by scholars.

The problem of precisely how ethical guidelines can be appropriately reinterpreted in the context of changing times and cultures was confronted early on in Buddhist religious history. By including only the presumed works of the Buddha, referred to as Buddhavacana, within a closed canon, nikāya Buddhism in general and Theravāda in particular made a clear statement about the relationship of community and scripture in the early tradition. Mahāyāna chose the opposite approach. As Coward points out: "Rather than closing off the canon as the Theravāda..."
school had done, Mahāyāna maintained an open approach and added to the ‘remembered words’ of Ananda new sūtras such as the Prajñāparamitā Sūtras and the Lotus Sūtra.\(^{72}\) This openness allowed Buddhists the occasion to utilize Buddha’s own approach in transmitting the substance of his teaching if not his exact words. Robinson and Johnson point this out clearly in The Buddhist Religion: “Both strictness in preserving the essential kernel and liberty to expand, vary, and embellish the expression characterize Buddhist attitudes through the ages toward not only texts but also art, ritual, discipline, and doctrine. The perennial difficulty lies in distinguishing the kernel from its embodiment.\(^{73}\)

The openness in creating new scripture emphasized by Mahāyāna, and the utilization of an on-going commentarial tradition, as fostered by earlier Buddhism, conjointly provide the potential for a profoundly current Buddhist ethics that is also textually grounded. Such an approach is solidly in keeping with the program outlined by Charles Weihsun Fu (in a slightly different context). Fu says, “The Buddhist view of ethics and morality must be presented in the context of open discussion in a free and democratic forum.”\(^{74}\) To be successful, it requires that

A philosophical reinterpretation of the Middle Way of paramārtha-satyā/samvṛti-satyā must be undertaken so that the original gap between these two can be firmly bridged, thereby accomplishing the task of constructive modernization of Buddhist ethics and morality. On the theoretical level, a new ethical theory based on the Middle Way of paramārtha-satyā/samvṛti-satyā can meet the challenge of modern times.\(^{75}\)

Not to beg the original question, the above more than argues for the composition of new commentarial literature focusing on those significant texts mentioned earlier and including especially, the: thirteen suttas identified as the “short tract” (Sīlakkhandhavagga) of the Dīgha Nikāya, Mangala-sutta, Metta-sutta, Sigālovāda-sutta, Dhammasaṅgani, Puggalapaññati, Abhidhammattha-saṅgaha and Milindapañha of the Theravādin tradition. Mahāyāna texts worthy of new consideration would also include those with the richest heritage of ethical underpinnings, for example, the: Brahmajāla-sūtra, Śikṣāsamuccaya, Bodhicaryāvatāra, Mahāyāna-samgraha, Bodhisattvabhūmi, Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra and Upālipariśrota-sūtra. Certainly this does not mean to say that there are no other texts of ethical import for Buddhism, but simply that the ones cited above represent the most fertile, reasonable place from which to begin a new and revitalized textual tradition. The process would be a high expression of what Coward calls “the reciprocal relationship between text and tradition in Buddhism,”\(^{76}\) a profound demonstration that Buddhist ethics can indeed be meaningfully current and textually supported.
NOTES

7 Ibid., p. 4.
11 For example, see Charles S. Prebish, Buddhist Monastic Discipline: The Sanskrit Prātimokṣa Sūtras of the Mahāsaṃghikas and Mulaśarvāstivādins (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. 42. The text reads:

śṭlena yuktō śrāmano tireti śṭlena yuktō brāhmaṇo tireti /
śṭlena yuktō naradevapūjyo śṭlena yuktasya hi prātimoksam //
15 Holt, Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapitaka p. 64.
   Keown, in The Nature of Buddhist Ethics p. 33, notices the same dilemma.
16 Pachow, A Comparative Study of the Pratimokṣa, Appendix I, pp. 1-2
17 Holt, Discipline: The Canonical Buddhism of the Vinayapitaka p. 65.
18 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics p. 34.
24 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics pp. 8-23.
25 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
26 Here I have in mind especially the work of Harvey Aronson, Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980) and Nathan Katz, Buddhist Images of Human Perfection (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982).
31 Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, pp. 111-112.
Ibid., p. 76.


Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, p. 29.


See, for example, Th. Stcherbatsky, The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word "Dharma," 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1956), pp. 84-86.

Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, p. 81.


Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, p. 81.

Ibid., p. 124.

Aronson, Love and Sympathy in Theravāda Buddhism. See especially pp. 3-10 on "Buddha's Sympathy," 11-23 on "Disciples' Sympathy," 60-77 on "The Sublime Attitudes," and 78-96 on "Equanimity."


Ibid., p. 93.

Keown, The Nature of Buddhist Ethics, p. 130.


Ibid., pp. 290-291


See Pierre Python (tr.) Vinaya-Viniścaya-Upālī-Paripaṛcchā (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1973), which offers Tibetan (with Sanskrit fragments) and Chinese text along with a French translation of the Chinese (taken from Taishō 310, 325, 326, and 1582). Python notes on page 1 that the Sanskrit fragments are taken from Dutt's edition of the Bodhisattva-prātimokṣa-sūtra. Python's text is an entirely different text than Valentina Stache-Rosen (tr.) Upāliparipaṛcchāsūtra: Ein Text zur buddhistischen Ordensdisziplin (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), which offers a translation from Chinese (Taishō 1466) with parallels to the Pali.


Joshi, Studies in the Buddhist Culture of India, p. 93. The Sanskrit reads:

yadā mama pāresāṁ ca bhayaṁ duḥkham ca na priyam /
tadatmanah ko viśeṣo yattamraksāmi netaram //


58 Matics, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, p. 157 (verse 1). The Sanskrit, from P. L. Vaidya (ed.), *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Santideva with the Commentary Pañjikā of Prajñākaramati* (Darbhanga: Mithila Institute, 1960), p. 44, is:

> evam gṛhītvā suddhāṃmbodhicittām jinātmajāh / 
> śikṣānatikrame yatnam kuryānityamatandritāh //

59 Ibid., p. 169. The Sanskrit, from P. L. Vaidya, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, p. 69, is:

> evam buddhā parārtheṣu bhavatsatamutṣṭhitāh / 
> nisiddhamapyanujñātāṃ kṛpalorarthadarśināḥ //


62 Ibid.


64 See, for example, *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chapter IV, verses 8-10; Matics, *Entering the Path of Enlightenment*, p. 158.


66 Ibid., p. 157.


Ibid., p. 142.


Fu, "From Paramārtha-satya to Samvṛti-satya: An Attempt at Constructive Modernization of (Mahāyāna) Buddhist Ethics," p. 327.

Ibid.

Coward, "The Role of Scripture in the Self-Definition of Hinduism and Buddhism in India," p. 143.