

Chapter IV

Buddhist Ethics and Virtue Ethics

"I believe all suffering is caused by ignorance. People inflict pain on others in the selfish pursuit of their happiness or satisfaction. Yet true happiness comes from a sense of peace and contentment, which in turn must be achieved through the cultivation of altruism, of love and compassion, and elimination of ignorance, selfishness, and greed"

~ His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama

1. The Buddha and the Middle Path
2. The Four Noble Truths
3. Interdependent Origination and Emptiness
4. Buddhist and Confucian Ethics
5. Basic Buddhist Precepts – The Ethics of Restraint
6. Virtue Ethics and Boundless Compassion
7. The Limits of the Ideal

1. The Buddha and the Middle Way

It is impossible to overstate the richness of Buddhist theology, mythology, and philosophy. In studying the moral philosophy of Buddhism we will not survey the rich pantheon of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, other Deities, and Guardian Kings that are part of the richness of Buddhism as a religion and cultural tradition. We will not attempt here a comprehensive introduction to Buddhist theology and philosophy.¹ We will focus in as narrowly as we can on Buddhist moral theory and practical ethics.² Our goal is to focus on the bare essentials that provide the necessary background for the ethics. To understand Buddhist ethics, however, we first need to understand something about the life of the Buddha.³

Of course, the full account of the life, and past lives, of the Buddha are rich and extensive.⁴ For our purposes, we need to understand the two basic paths taken by the

¹ For an introduction to Buddhist philosophy, see Damien Keown *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1996/2000). For an excellent account of Buddhist practice and tradition, see John Strong *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretation*, 2nd Edition (Wadsworth, 2001). For a more focused account of a particular Buddhist tradition and culture, see Robert Thurman *Essential Tibetan Buddhism* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1995).

² Our account of Buddhist ethics is indebted to Peter Harvey's comprehensive account of Buddhist ethics, *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics* (Cambridge, 2000), and to His Holiness The Dalai Lama, *Ethics for a New Millennium* (Riverhead Books, 1999).

³ [Make the connection with the Hadith and the life of Muhammad. Keown on "Buddhist Sharia"]

⁴ For an account of the life of the Buddha, see Michael Carrithers *Buddha: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1983/2001). For a fascinating account of the countless past lives of the Buddha (as recounted in the Jataka tales), see John Strong *The Buddha* (Oneworld Publications, 2001).

Buddha before his awakening and enlightenment. The Buddha was born in Northeastern India, about 2,500 years ago, into a life of luxury. In the story of his life, he was born a prince, and his father did all that he could to protect him from the suffering of the world, especially from knowledge of illness, old age and death. Despite his father's best efforts, the Buddha encountered the frailty and mortality of human life, and he thus became aware of the transience and shallowness of his life of ease and luxury. The Buddha thus set out from the comfort of his home to seek to understand the true human condition and find enlightenment. He follows the supposed path to enlightenment offered by the yogic ascetic teachers of his day. In tales of the life of the Buddha, he pursues with resolve and extreme determination the life of ascetic self-denial and amazes his teachers with the purity and extremes of his practice. The idea of achieving release from suffering through self-denial and self-torment is somewhat paradoxical. The rough idea, however, is that the first path of the Buddha's life, the path of luxury, involved an attempt to satisfy all desires, and so the second path takes the alternative approach of trying to extinguish and transcend all desire. If happiness is thought of as desire satisfaction, there are two ways to accomplish this. One can either attempt to satisfy all of the desires that one happens to have, or one can try to have as few desires as possible so that one is easily satisfied. The ascetic path takes this second approach. In addition, however, this approach included a belief that through suffering one discharges, or pays for, one's past bad deeds and essentially purifies oneself. (The idea here is linked to the idea of karma and rebirth explained below.) The Buddha is said to have seen that both paths do not result in a release from suffering. This is part of the Buddha's insight into the Middle Way (explained below) that is a path between the life of luxury and conspicuous consumption and of extreme (and often ostentatious) self-denial and self-torment.

As an important part of his yogic training, however, the Buddha masters the techniques of meditation that leads to ever deeper states of focused absorption on a particular object of meditation. These states of meditative absorption first free the mind of restless desire, anger and doubt. Deeper states of absorption are said to free one of thinking and transcend pleasure and comfort, eventually dissolving the self into a bare point of consciousness. In addition to absorption meditation, the Buddha also masters the four "Meditative Planes." These are difficult to describe without recourse into more abstract philosophy, but the basic idea should suffice. The meditative planes do not focus on a particular object but instead focus on aspects of consciousness itself. The first plane for example involves a focus on space and extension itself rather than a particular object. The next plane focuses on consciousness itself rather than the objects of consciousness. The third plane focuses on nothingness (and this is of course hard to describe), and the fourth plane is beyond nothingness, "neither perception nor non perception" which is the most bare limit of meditative awareness itself (and this is simply indescribable!).⁵ Beyond the planes of meditative awareness is a further state of "cessation" of all conscious awareness. This seems to involve the inducement of a sort of temporary vegetative state, but it also includes the apparent cessation of heart and lung activity. The only evidence of continued life is the subject's continued warm body temperature.⁶ This capacity for this type of temporary cessation through meditation is rare indeed.

⁵ On meditation, see Carrithers pp. 31-36.

⁶ Get reference and comment on relation to definition of death.

The point of this account of yogic meditation, however, is two fold. First meditative practice is an important part of Buddhism, but, second, it just is not sufficient for enlightenment. During the above described meditative practices, one does indeed escape *temporarily* from the tyranny of desire, but even the most talented practitioner must return to ordinary consciousness. When one does return, the Buddha maintained, one simply is not fundamentally transformed. Indeed, through meditative practice one's awareness and mind becomes ever better trained, but this training does not necessarily lead to any moral improvement. The Buddha thus rejects the path of ascetic yogic meditation as the path to enlightenment. He does not reject meditation, however. Instead, Buddhism develops a complimentary form of meditation focused on ever greater insight and virtue. "Insight Meditation" uses the increased mental focus of meditative states as a vehicle of inner transformation and insight into the nature of reality. Recognizing the limits of meditation as a vehicle of enlightenment was thus part of the awakening into the Buddha, the Enlightened One, and his recognition of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, which reveal the true path to the end of suffering.

Before we consider this, however, we must have a basic understanding of the **Doctrine of Karma and of Rebirth**. It is a fundamental assumption of Buddhist thought that each living thing is born, lives, dies, and is reborn in a never ending and never beginning process. When a living being dies, it is reborn as another living thing. Animals can be reborn as humans and humans can be reborn as animals. The nature of one's rebirth depends on the nature of one's life, and the nature of one's life depends on one's karma. In Buddhism, at the most basic level karma is a principle of causation associated with voluntary actions motivated by choice, that is, by deliberate intentional actions. All such actions have a positive, negative, or neutral moral character. Actions with positive character result in/cause positive effects (and contribute to a good rebirth). Actions with negative character result in/cause negative effects (and contribute to a lower rebirth). Only intentional actions have a moral character and thus a Karmic character. In so far as moral action is not possible for an animal (or a lower-being in another realm) the accumulated negative karmic energy is discharged slowly overtime in the particular realm of rebirth. We will discuss the importance of the Doctrine of Karma and Rebirth more extensively below, but this basic account suffices for setting out The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

2. The Four Noble Truths

According to legend, after the Buddha had first lived a life of luxury and had also pursued the ascetic life, he was sitting and meditating, under the Bodhi tree (the tree of enlightenment) when he experienced **The Four Noble Truths**:⁷

The Truth of Suffering:

All existence is ultimately unsatisfactory and human suffering is inescapable.

Even those things that seem to bring joy and pleasure in the end are unsatisfying and unfulfilling, and thus leave us discontent and craving for something more.

We have seen that the life of luxury is still afflicted by illness, old age and death. Luxury and amusement also does not provide real inner satisfaction. Even the contemplative states of yogic meditation are temporary, impermanent and in the end leave us where we

⁷ See Keown, *Buddhism*, chapter 4. For an audio account go to:
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism/beliefs/fournobletruths.shtml>

were when we started. With a better trained mind, for sure, but nonetheless none the better.

The Truth of the Arising of Suffering in Craving:

The root of suffering can be defined as a craving or clinging; the endless seeking for fresh experiences; the thirst for sensual pleasure, for existence, even for non-existence.

When desires are satisfied new desires immediately arise from them and simply replace them, leaving one no more satisfied or at peace than before. The satisfaction of desires simply does not satisfy. It is thus craving that keeps us from achieving inner peace and contentment. It is also craving itself that gives rise to the endless cycle of rebirth.

The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering through Transcendence, Nirvana:

It is possible to find an end to all forms of suffering, and unhappiness through the cessation of craving (with all of its associated attachments and delusions), and thereby achieve liberation from the otherwise endless cycle of desire and also from the endless cycle of rebirth itself.

There are two ideas here. The first is a conception of nirvana as a true inner peace, or simply true happiness. This is a conception of happiness as inner peace that provides a focus for living our day to day lives. We can each aim to eliminate craving and to overcome the self destructive “poisons” of anger, hatred, and delusion within ourselves. The Dalai Lama often emphasizes this aspect of Buddhist ethics, and he suggests that it can be substantially detached from the metaphysics of rebirth and transcendence, which is the second idea here.

The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to achieve liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth itself. This is a complete transcendence and an attainment beyond our conceptions of space, time, and causality. In the story of the Buddha, the former idea of embodied enlightenment is captured in his life after his full realization of the four noble truths. The Buddha continues to live out his natural life as the Enlightened One. This is described as “enlightenment with remainder.” At his death, the Buddha achieves Pari-Nirvana, which is final enlightenment. Pari-Nirvana is not an additional achievement but rather comes naturally at the end of a life in which enlightenment has been achieved.

This later conception of Nirvana as escape from the cycle of endless rebirth is more metaphysical and immediately gives rise to difficult question of Buddhist philosophy/theology. We need to be aware of this conception, but it is a rare person indeed that achieves true enlightenment. It is normal to want to no more about the nature of transcendence and pari-nirvana but as the Buddha cautions a suffering person pierced with an arrow should not concern himself with what it will be like when the arrow causing the suffering is removed. If a medic comes and offers to relieve the suffering, is this not enough? We can concern ourselves with the nature of Nirvana after our suffering has ended. As a practical matter, the goal of the moral life for the Buddhist is focused on transformation here and now. This will be our focus.

The Truth of the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to Nirvana:

The path is the **Middle Way** between a life of self indulgence and a life of harsh austerity or ascetic self-denial.

The Path involves three main aspects (wisdom, moral conduct, and transformative meditation), but it is broken down into eight elements:

Wisdom

- Right understanding (grasping the teachings of Buddhism)
- Right resolve (a serious commitment to the path)

Morality

- Right speech (being honest, sincere, and sensitive)
- Right action (following the precepts of morality)
- Right livelihood (living in a way that does not harm others)

Meditation

- Right effort (controlling one's thoughts, emotions, and attitudes)
- Right mindfulness (a calm and clear awareness of experience)
- Right meditation (techniques that develop deeper levels of insight and awareness)

First, it is important to appreciate that the relationship between these aspects of the eightfold path is one of interdependence. Enlightenment clearly involves a combination of *wisdom and morality*, and it is *meditation* that leads to both greater insight and moral transformation. We will focus on morality below but, as we shall see, wisdom and meditation are not easily separated from the Buddhist account of morality. In addition, the standard division into wisdom, morality, and meditation treats these as separate in a way that is misleading. The eight elements reintegrate in complex ways the elements of wisdom and morality: Wisdom involves understanding and resolve. Morality is honesty and sensitivity in speech and right livelihood, which presupposes knowledge of truth and of consequences. Meditation both expresses and develops insight, and it transforms conduct, emotions, and attitudes through greater insight but also greater sensitivity and thus greater compassion. This interdependence of wisdom, morality, and meditation is central to the distinctive nature of the Middle Path of Buddhism. Here we already see the way in which meditative practice is reoriented in Buddhism as a means to greater insight and greater virtue.

Another essential aspect of the Eightfold Path is that it involves following the model of the Buddha. The Buddha provides an ideal of perfect wisdom, awareness, and compassion that we can try to model in our own lives. A Buddhist “takes refuge” in the Buddha, the Dharma (the truth revealed by the Buddha), and the Sangha (which is the community of monks that preserves the knowledge of the Buddha and the Dharma). This element of refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, is clearly a source of comfort but it also provides a model of how to live. The idea that right conduct, indeed that the best life, involves doing what a fully virtuous person would do, and as a result overtime becoming virtuous oneself, is a core idea of Virtue Ethics. As we will see, Buddhist ethics includes clear rules of conduct, but the model of a perfectly wise and virtuous “role model” is an essential part of the Path and the Middle Way.⁸

3. Interdependent Origination, No-Self, and Emptiness

In addition to the Four Noble Truths, there are three additional doctrines which are essential to an understanding of Buddhist ethics in particular. The first is the **Doctrine of Karma and Rebirth** sketched above. The second is the **Doctrine of Inter-Dependent Origination** (also called **Codependent Arising**), which asserts that all of existence is essentially interrelated, interdependent, and interconnected. The third is the **Doctrine of No-Self**, which applies interdependent origination to the self, and thus

⁸ See Keown, *Buddhism*, p.56.

concludes that there is no essential enduring self. These two doctrines are the core of Buddhist philosophy: “*One who sees interdependent origination sees the Dharma sees the Buddha.*”⁹ Although the causal integration and slow transformation of the elements creates the illusion of an enduring self, the self is simply a momentary configuration of discreet, although causally codependent, changing elements. The self is essentially interrelated, interconnected, and interdependent on the rest of existence. There is no unitary permanent self.

In a later philosophical development, Nagarjuna (the most important Buddhist philosopher -- other than the Buddha -- probably from the 2nd century CE) further develops this idea. He emphasizes that the elements (that seem to constitute the self and other things) are also mere impermanence, in the sense that they too lack any inherent reality. At the most basic level, there is nothing solid or substantial that makes up everything else. In this sense, the essence of everything is really empty. But this is not to deny that things exist; it is to point out that the nature of their existence. This is the famous “**Doctrine of Emptiness.**” A simple way of thinking of this idea is that all existence is fundamentally *relational*. In understanding this concept it helps to start with a simple obvious example. The concept of a mother presupposes the concept of a child. It also suggests a particular social relationship between the child and the mother, other than female, that is distinct from a father. In these ways the concept of mother can only be understood in its relation to other concepts. It has no meaning or referent independent from these relations – and it is thus relational. According to the doctrine of emptiness this kind of relational dependence is true of everything. In addition, things do not have real essences that persist through time and change. There are no basic essential elements that undergo change but are themselves unchanging. Reality is just a dynamic of interrelated forces and *processes*. In more philosophical terminology, this view is a form of thoroughgoing *anti-essentialism*. Again it helps to look at a more obvious example. What is a chair? Chairs can have four legs, three legs, or be one piece. They can be made of wood or metal or plastic. Is a bar stool a chair? Is an ottoman a chair, if it is used for a chair? There seems to be no core, essential, unchanging attribute of all chairs; except perhaps that chairs are for people to sit on, but that is relational. In addition, can a chair be a piece of art that is not intended for sitting? The chair as art may still be a chair because of its relation with useful chairs. The case of mothers and chairs are easy cases. The more radical claim of emptiness is that this type of relational anti-essentialism is true of all reality without exception.

The philosophical doctrine of emptiness is complex and fascinating. It is interesting, for example, to explore the connections between the doctrine of emptiness and contemporary physics. In addition, some contemporary theories of mind and sense perception also reject the idea of a unitary mind and self. We will not here explore these connections. It is enough to note that in addition to philosophical arguments, the doctrine of No-Self is compatible with a naturalistic scientific worldview. We will focus on the implications of interdependent origination for Buddhist ethics and here it is the doctrine of no-self that is crucial.

A central thesis of Buddhist ethics is that the self is simply a particular contingent configuration of impermanent attributes and a dynamic of psychic energy. The self is constituted by physical form, sense perception, emotions and feelings, cognition,

⁹ Quoted by Strong, p. 101.

consciousness, and the forces of karmic causality that causes rebirth itself. It is the relation of these changing elements that constitutes what we call the self, and nothing more.¹⁰

As a final note, Nagarjuna also believed that the doctrine of emptiness means that there is no essential difference between the realm of normal existence (or Samsara) and realm of enlightenment (or Nirvana). The difference is just one of perspective and illusion. The Four Noble Truths, and No-Self, and Emptiness are always true even though they are not recognized. Enlightenment is thus simply seeing the here and now without illusion or delusions.¹¹ This conception of Nirvana or enlightenment has particular appeal in that it does not require any idea of metaphysical transcendence, with all the complexity and mystery such ideas involve. Although Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness is itself difficult to comprehend, it also thoroughly demystifies Nirvana.

4. Buddhist and Confucian Ethics

The first small step on the long path to seeing the emptiness of the self involves recognizing human interdependence. Each person is dependent on and fundamentally connected to other people and to a particular community. Confucian ethics, with its focus on family and social relationships, is in this respect similar to Buddhist ethics. Buddhism and Confucianism involve a similar worldview, but Buddhism goes further. Buddhism extends relational thinking to all other persons and indeed, to all living things, and to the natural world. As a result, the individualism, which is often considered the central insight of modern Western thought, is viewed as a fundamental delusion from the perspective of both Confucian and Buddhist thought. Confucian ethics focuses on our connection with our family and community. Buddhism is based on a deeper and more pervasive connection between all things. Indeed, the conception of the interdependence of all beings and an ideal of boundless compassion for all beings replaces the relational responsibilities of Confucian ethics. Buddhism also lacks the more paternalistic authoritarianism of Confucian thought. And instead embraces equality and opposes oppression at its core. In this respect Buddhist ethics is similar to rights theory. In Chapter III, we suggested that relationships give rise to responsibilities and rights, and that each has its proper place in a complete ethical framework. This conception of the place of rights is also compatible with Buddhist ethics.¹²

Nonetheless, Buddhism also recognizes the psychological power of familial relationships in generating a sense of connection and responsibility. In developing compassion for other beings, it is common for Tibetan Buddhists to maintain that in a previous life, going back infinitely into the past, every other living being (even the lowly worm) was probably once one's mother. In Confucian thought the authority and benevolence of the father is the moral model for all social relationships. In Buddhism, the love for one's mother, the dependence on one's mother, is a model for one's relationship to all living things. Also recall that Confucian ethics emphasizes the virtue of benevolence and the necessity of propriety. Buddhism and Confucianism are also here

¹⁰ On the doctrine of no-self, see Steven Collins *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge University Press, 1982). In western philosophy these issues are explored in David Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* and Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons*.

¹¹ Keown p. 66-68, and Strong pp. 146-51.

¹² Dalai Lama p. 14.

joined at their ethical core in that they both emphasize benevolence or compassion above all else. In addition, Buddhism also recognizes the importance of rules of propriety and conduct as essential to moral development. Morality starts with the restraint of moral rules and develops into inner virtue.

5. Basic Buddhist Precepts – The Ethics of Restraint

The Buddhist emphasizes the interdependence of all things and this is true of the relationship between morality, wisdom, and meditation. At the most basic level, morality is about how to live and one's most fundamental ends. The morality of actions is also the source of karma and shapes virtue. Indeed the path of morality leads to the inner peace and calm that is a prerequisite for meditation and the cultivation of wisdom. On the other hand, understanding and control of one's mind are also essential prerequisites for morality. To live a moral life is to live in harmony and accordance with the Dharma, which signifies the laws, physical and moral, of the universe. (The conception of harmony between our actions and attitudes and the nature of things reveals a common thread in the worldview of Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist thought.)

We can think of morality on different levels. At the first level moral behavior involves five core precepts which are restraints on action.

It is wrong:

- (1) to kill or injure living things;
- (2) to steal or cheat others;
- (3) to engage in sexual immorality;
- (4) to lie or use deception;
- (5) to use intoxicants.

On the one hand, these are the core principles of everyday common sense morality in most cultures, but, on the other hand, the requirement to not injure or kill is taken more seriously by many Buddhist and it includes all sentient beings. Another important difference is that the point of these restraints is that, according to Buddhism, the temptation to violate these precepts is actually self-destructive and a sign of inner weakness. We should resist these behaviors in much the same way that an addict resists drugs that they consider harmful. We are often tempted to deceive or cheat or injure others, but these actions really harm and injure us. Why this is supposed to be so will be clearer below.

Although there is a tendency to interpret these precepts as intrinsic moral demands (or divine commands of the Buddha), this goes against the basic philosophical and teleological aspect of Buddhist morality.¹³ Buddhist morality is for the sake of an end, which is individual transformation, the elimination of suffering and enlightenment. Simple moral rules are derivative and dependent. Furthermore, the idea of intrinsic and essential rightness is inconsistent with the doctrine of interdependence and emptiness.

¹³ Keown both emphasizes the teleological nature of Buddhist morality and yet seems to interpret it as if it is a body of fixed and immutable laws. This is especially clear in his reliance on classical sources to determine the Buddhist position on moral question. In countless places, we find appeals to authoritative texts trumping rational analysis of moral questions. It is not clear why Buddhist ethics should be interpreted on the model of the Sharia. The Sharia starts with Divine Revelation and requires submission to an external Divine Will and the Messenger Muhammad. Buddhist emphasizes seeing the truth for oneself and is fundamentally rationalist in its conception of morality. Each individual must see for themselves the Dharma.

The **Doctrine of Skillful Means**, developed by the Mahayana Buddhist tradition (explained below), reflects a truer conception of the place of moral rules. The doctrine of “skillful means” permits (or sometimes requires) actions that are generally wrong (infringements of the precepts or monastic vows) when it is really necessary to achieve a significant compassionate end. Although this is restricted to more enlightened beings (that is Bodhisattvas), it nonetheless recognizes that compassion can justify even killing in extraordinary circumstances. I suspect the restriction to more enlightened beings is based on the recognition that great virtue and wisdom are required if one is to avoid the temptation to take advantage of, and thus abuse, such a permission. Wisdom and virtue are necessary for discerning when such skillful means are indeed necessary.

The point of the moral rules is that human beings are tempted to rationalize deception, stealing, and violence when these actions are not justified. So too, unrestrained sexuality leads people to actions that are harmful to both self and others. In the case of the fifth precept against intoxicants, the danger here is both drinking too much, and thus losing one’s moral judgment and self control, and of course addiction. Other drugs are similarly dangerous and addictive, and thus potentially harmful to self and others. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with intoxicants; it the consequences of intoxication that is the problem. The precepts are thus best viewed as excellent and reliable summary rules of right conduct. A person on the path to enlightenment, however, will see that true compassion sometimes leads to breaking a precept in order to help others.¹⁴

It is even clearer that the moral precepts are principles of self-restraint and self-discipline when we look at the precepts that are added to the core four or five. The Five Precepts are sometimes supplemented by additional precepts. Most common are the Eight Precepts, which changes (3) to a vow to avoid all sexual conduct and adds the following additional precepts:

- (6) restrictions on eating at certain times (after noon, for example),
- (7) avoiding entertainment and personal adornments (like dancing and jewelry),
- (8) avoiding beds and sitting and sleeping on mats.

These precepts are all forms of self restraint that are part of a simpler and more monastic life, but these are still precepts for lay people. These additional precepts are typically added on holy days, much like the Muslim commitment of Ramadan, they may also be taken on as an individual voluntary commitment, perhaps for only certain limited lengths of time. In this way a lay person can take on some of the aspects and the benefits of the monastic life.¹⁵

The real distinctive ethical core of Classical Buddhism is not so much its moral precepts for laypersons, but it is instead its conception of wisdom (the four noble truths), of insight meditation, and the discipline of its distinctive **Monastic Life**. The novice entering the community of monks, The Sangha, essentially sets out in earnest on the path

¹⁴ Contrast Kant view to the contrary in his essay “On the Alleged Right to Lie from a Benevolent Motive. The Doctrine of skillful means is presented and developed in the *Lotus Sutra*. The Mahayana tradition reorients from a path of personal transformation to a movement directed toward the enlightenment of all living beings. The ideal of the Bodhisattvas, which are beings that have vowed to dedicate their lives to the enlightenment of all beings, become the central ideal. The Buddha in turn recedes to a more transcendent role. For an excellent account of Mahayana variations on classical Theravada Buddhism, see Keown chapter 5.

¹⁵ For a full account of the precepts, see Harvey pp. 65-88, and on the monastic life, see pp. 88-96.

of the Buddha. The goal is nothing less than a full understanding of the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, its source in craving, the cessation of suffering and final liberation from the cycle of rebirth. As a result those who enter the monastic life take on much more extensive and comprehensive vows, which include many additional precepts (indeed over two hundred rules of conduct). Buddhist monks also leave their families behind and give up all of their worldly possessions just as the Buddha did. In the monastic life, The Eightfold Path is developed into a comprehensive, highly structured, and disciplined life that is completely devoted to self-transformation through a directed series of insight meditation, and ever increasing detachment, virtue, and wisdom.

Buddhist monks, however, are famous for their bright smiles, joy, and sense of humor. Remember the Buddha rejects the self-torment and self-mortification of the ascetics and in this spirit Buddhism embraces instead a more ironic and carefree stance that is more characteristic of detachment from self and desire. After all, one cannot transcend oneself if one takes oneself too seriously. On the path of inner growth, we have the intensity of focused meditation, the calm and mindful awareness of the present, but we must also be smiling and laughing at all of the joys and foibles of life.

The classical model of the monastic life is also a beggar's life. The monastic community survives on the charity of the lay community. Each monk's possessions include his simple robe and begging bowl. It is part of the monastic routine to walk through the village humbly seeking food. The practice of begging is humbling and emphasizes one's dependence on others, but it also keeps the monks connected to non-monastic community. The monastic life is clearly dependent on the charity of the laity and to some critics of Buddhism this suggests a semi-parasitic existence on the more complete life of those who are instead working hard to sustain daily life. But this criticism is rejected by lay Buddhists. In return for the gifts of food, the monks serve the community by preserving the Dharma, the teachings of Buddhism, and they contribute to the enlightenment of all by spreading the teaching of the Buddha. The relationship between the laity and the communities of monks is thus viewed as one of reciprocity and mutual benefit. Indeed, Buddhist monks live the simplest of lives, and thus sustaining their simple existence is not a large burden on the lay community.

Monastic Buddhism, however, is focused on individual self development. The individual monks are striving to achieve personal enlightenment and thus release from the cycle of rebirth. The ethics of the monastic code with its hundreds of precepts is a morality of discipline and self-development towards enlightenment, in the context of a community of others dedicated to the same cause. An alternative conception, especially prominent in Mahayana Buddhism, focuses on the release of all beings from suffering and the cycle of rebirth. In Mahayana tradition, even enlightened beings, called Bodhisattvas, postpone their final escape from the cycle of rebirth and return voluntarily to this realm in order to help all beings achieve enlightenment. This tradition of the Bodhisattvas also emphasizes the inner "Buddha-Nature" of all. For the Mahayana Buddhist, the goal of the ethical life is not personal release from suffering; it is developing boundless compassion towards all beings. The goal for each is the release of all.

The first vein of Buddhism is associated with the classical Theravada tradition which is dominant in South Asia; that is, Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The second vein is associated with the Mahayana traditions that is dominate

in East Asia; that is, China, Korea, Mongolia, Japan, Vietnam and also Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. This is not a sharp divide and we will not concern ourselves with the difference in these two traditions. The characterization of Buddhist virtue ethics that follows, however, is drawn heavily on Tibetan Buddhism and the writings of the Dalai Lama and clearly reflects strong elements of Mahayana tradition.

6. Virtue Ethics and Boundless Compassion

The essential core of morality for Mahayana Buddhism is **Compassion** towards all living creatures and **Equanimity** of mind that is reflected in all of one's actions, reactions, and perceptions. Wisdom and compassion are the Buddha-essence. The development of wisdom and compassion is the essence of The Path and the Middle Way, but meditation is still the means by which we develop ever greater wisdom and compassion. The goal of Buddhism recall is release from suffering. We all want to be happy and avoid suffering. The insight of the Mahayana tradition is that the key to happiness is developing both insight and boundless compassion. In particular, there are two insights that are essential to happiness.¹⁶

The first is that cognition, emotion and will are all interconnected. Let us start with the cognitive theory of the emotions. The emotion of fear usually has a clear cognitive content which includes the belief that something is dangerous or harmful. To take a simple example, fear of flying in an airplane includes beliefs about airplanes, flying, and danger. Fear of flying also involves the will in that it often includes a sense of losing control and thus a sense of vulnerability (which is also cognitive). Some emotions may be more instinctual but most human emotions are laced with cognition. Without the underlying beliefs, it would not be the same emotion. Cognition also involves the will and emotion. If we do not take an interest in the objects of thought we simply cannot concentrate and take in the information. Indeed, the more engaged and interesting something is the more we can concentrate and the more we learn and remember. So emotions essentially include cognition and cognition presupposes effective engagement. It follows that one can change one's emotions, passions, and desires by changing one's beliefs and conception of reality. This is how insight transforms character.

Second, emotion affects cognition in another important way. If we are angry or upset about something, we cannot concentrate and think clearly. Indeed, even one's capacity for perception is diminished by powerful emotions. The Dalai Lama calls the emotion that disrupt are mind in this way the "afflictive emotions." Emotions like anger, hatred, greed, and lust generate powerful desires and unsettle our minds. Indeed, they distort our judgment, undermine our will, and ruin our sleep. Furthermore, when we act on these desires their satisfaction does not leave us satisfied at all. If a person is emotional in this way, they are never at peace. If they do not act on afflictive desires, the passions do not just go away; they remain and corrode from within. If instead the person acts on the desire and expresses hatred, for example, there is the momentary release of aggression but the person is no better off. In addition, by expressing anger one has probably hardened an enemy who may then retaliate in turn. On the other hand, the person without anger does suffer from its loss and is thus only a gainer.

¹⁶ See the Dalai Lama chapters 6-8.

Insight meditation aimed at anger would first help one internalize a deep awareness of the self-destructive nature of anger. It would also focus on the source of the anger and reveal its causes, its thorough interdependence, and ultimately its emptiness. Anger has a cognitive component and is thus focused on an object, but the object has no real essence -- and is itself caused by and dependent on a complex web of connections. As the essence of the object of anger dissolves so too does the anger that itself depended on a distorted conception of its object. In this way, insight into interdependent origination transforms the cognition itself, and reveals that anger and hatred, and all afflictive emotions, are based on delusion and confusion.

It is not surprising that the satisfaction of these desires founded on delusion lead only to more misery and suffering – both for oneself and for others. But insight must get *into* the anger itself; the mere knowledge that anger is afflictive and self-destructive does not extinguish anger. Similarly, if I simply give someone the facts of airline safety, that does not eliminate all the fear of flying. The orientation must be shifted both cognitively and emotionally, and this is a matter of fundamentally transforming the way one thinks and feels. The moral rules (or precepts) are a first step, but without insight and understanding rules and restraint alone leave desires to still fester within. It is thus necessary to also reflect on the causes and nature of anger and on the real nature of the object of one's animosity. It is only through greater understanding, and long practice, that established habits of thought and actions can be altered and reoriented. Buddhist insight meditation thus has a mission that was lacking in the earlier yogic practices. Indeed, insight meditation (and mindfulness of interdependent origination) is also a way of life, in that one can adopt a meditative stance almost anywhere and anytime.¹⁷

7. The Limits of the Ideal

The Buddhist belief in rebirth and karma make a significant difference in framing and negotiating particular moral problems are framed and negotiated. This is especially true of course when the issues involve the ethics of the beginning of life and the end of life. On the other hand, the conception of moral psychology, especially the destructive nature of the afflictive emotions, does not presuppose any distinctive karmic causality. The bad consequences (to self and others) of wrong actions are explained in a way that makes no appeal to the metaphysics of karma and rebirth. The analysis of suffering, of the afflictive emotions, and of the power of insight meditation is straightforward and universal. The benefits of a calm disciplined mind are unquestionably appealing, although hard to attain.

The ideal of boundless compassion is inspiring and impressive but it is also actually more controversial. Boundless compassion makes no distinction among persons, or even living things. Some will surely object that particular relationships with spouses and children and friends are the great source of joy and meaning in life. We are indeed in webs of relationships but some relationships are more central and definitive than others. Even if we grant that everything is interdependent, some processes are more constitutive than others, and thus also affect us more. It is true that personal attachments also make

¹⁷ Author's note: More of a discussion is called for on the Ideal of Boundless Compassion, and perhaps more on the nature of Virtue ethics: focal point or foundational?

one more vulnerable, but this vulnerability may be more than compensated in the rewards of mutual love and kindness.

This is not to deny that the afflictive emotions are especially destructive to healthy relationships. The question is whether personal love and familial love must be afflictive. The ideal of boundless compassion may be an especially suitable ideal for a Buddhist monk, but monks leave family and romantic love behind. Boundless compassion transcends (or abandons) all personal attachment. It is noteworthy that if we were all celibate monks, there would be no more precious human rebirths, and to some this itself exposes the limits of the ideal itself. A more bounded goal would be to aim for personal attachments without destructive emotions, and to lead an ethical life that shows compassion for all. We will leave this issue aside, however. The core of Buddhism is the transformative power of compassion, and the core thesis is that egoism does not bring happiness. In our world today, with its unfettered embrace of individualism, the Buddhist ideal of great compassion is to many an inspiring vision of a better path.

As the Dalai Lama puts it:

“This is not a matter for complicated theorizing. It is a matter of common sense. There is no denying that consideration of others is worthwhile. There is no denying that our happiness is inextricably bound up with the happiness of others. There is no denying that if society suffers, we ourselves suffer. Nor is there any denying that the more are hearts and minds are afflicted with ill-will, the more miserable we become. Thus we can reject everything else: religion, ideology, all received wisdom. But we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion.

This, then, is my true religion, my simple faith. In this sense, there is no need for temple or church, for mosque or synagogue, no need for complicated philosophy, doctrine or dogma. Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple. The doctrine is compassion. Love for others and respect for their rights and dignity, no matter who or what they are: ultimately these are all we need. So long as we practice these in our daily lives, then no matter if we are learned or unlearned, whether we believe in Buddha or God, or follow some other religion or none at all, as long as we have compassion for others and conduct ourselves with restraint out of a sense of responsibility, there is no doubt we will be happy.”¹⁸

¹⁸ The Dalai Lama, p. 234.