



Damien Keown

# BUDDHIST ETHICS

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

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## Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction

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# Preface

This book is written for a broad general readership. It is for Buddhists interested in ethical questions, for ethicists interested in Buddhism, for school or university students exploring the ethics of Buddhism – perhaps in conjunction with other world religions – and for the general reader who is simply curious about whether an Eastern tradition such as Buddhism can shed any light on problems that the West has found difficult and divisive.

The book offers an overview of how Buddhism might respond to the ethical dilemmas confronting the modern world. It discusses six contemporary issues: animals and the environment, sexuality, war and terrorism, abortion, suicide and euthanasia, and cloning. As a preliminary to addressing these topics, the first chapter explains the basic moral teachings of Buddhism and the second considers theoretical questions about the nature of these teachings in relation to Western ethics. Since Buddhist ethics is an unfamiliar subject in the West, a strategy adopted in some chapters is to take the more familiar Christian perspective on the issues as a point of departure. This allows comparisons and contrasts to be drawn with Buddhism, and hopefully will accelerate the reader's grasp of what is distinctive in the Buddhist approach.

As its name implies, the discipline of Buddhist ethics emerges from the interface between two complex and largely independent fields of

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knowledge – Buddhism and ethics. Separate introductions to both of these disciplines are available in the present series, and this short work makes no attempt to replace them. Instead, its aim is to focus on the point where these subjects intersect to form a new field of enquiry, one that has so far received very little attention from experts in either of its component disciplines.

A basic knowledge of Buddhism is assumed in the pages that follow, and readers who lack this are advised to consult first my companion volume in the series *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Some material relating to ethics there has been adapted for use here, notably the explanation of karma in Chapter 1, but the discussion of basic doctrines such as the Four Noble Truths has not been repeated. The ‘Buddhism’ discussed in the present work is not that of any one school, culture, or historical period, and, although my own expertise is in Theravāda Buddhism, my remarks are made with respect to an amorphous fiction which for convenience might be termed ‘mainstream Buddhism’. What is meant by this is explained further in Chapter 2. While endeavouring to represent the views of the mainstream, however, this work has no pretensions to being authoritative or definitive. It scarcely needs saying that the issues explored here are controversial, and while some readers may find that the approach taken is congenial to their own reading of Buddhism, others will no doubt disagree, perhaps strongly, with the conclusions reached. Disagreements on ethical matters are almost inevitable given the nature of the subject matter, but hopefully even readers who disagree will feel better informed about alternative perspectives. Overall, I have tried to adopt the role of sympathetic critic, identifying what I see as both the strengths and weaknesses of the Buddhist perspective in the hope of generating a productive dialogue.

The task of writing this short book has been greatly assisted by the publication of Peter Harvey’s longer introductory work *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). This excellent textbook contextualizes the issues with more historical, cultural,

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and textual detail than can be included in the present volume, and is recommended to readers who wish to pursue the subject at greater length. The Further reading section at the end of this volume contains additional guidance on sources relating to the particular topics discussed herein.

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# Acknowledgements

This book is based on a course taught at Goldsmiths College, London, and I am grateful to present and past students for their interest in the subject and their questions and comments over the years. I am grateful to Goldsmiths College and to the Arts and Humanities Research Board for funding sabbatical leave to allow me to complete the book during the academic year 2003–4, and to the publishers for permission to reuse some material mainly from Chapters 2 and 8 of my companion volume in the series, *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. I am also indebted to my former student Pragati Sahni for her assistance with Chapter 3. Finally, I would like to thank George Miller for inaugurating this project during his time with the Press, and Emma Simmons and Marsha Filion for seeing the volume through to publication.

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# Note on citations and pronunciation

From time to time, the reader will encounter references in the form D.ii.95. These are references to Buddhist scriptures, specifically the Pāli Text Society editions of the Theravāda Buddhist canon. The key to the reference is as follows. The initial letter refers to one of the five divisions (*nikāyas*) into which the Buddha's discourses (*suttas*) are collated.

- D Dīgha Nikāya
- M Majjhima Nikāya
- A Aṅguttara Nikāya
- S Saṃyutta Nikāya
- K Khuddaka Nikāya

The Roman numeral (ii) denotes the volume number, and the Arabic numeral (95) denotes the page number. Thus the reference D.ii.95 is to volume two, page 95, of the Dīgha Nikāya.

A small number of references with the prefix Vin will also be encountered. These refer to a division of the Pāli canon known as the Vinaya, which contains material relating to monastic law. Independent texts from the Khuddaka Nikāya, such as the *Sutta Nipāta*, also have their own abbreviations (in this case Sn). A capital letter A after any of the above abbreviations (such as DA) means the reference is to the commentary (*aṭṭhakathā*) on the text in question. Translations of the entire Pāli canon into English have been published by the



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Pāli Text Society (<http://www.palitext.demon.co.uk/>) and more recent translations are available from Wisdom Publications (<http://www.wisdompubs.org>). Translations of other texts cited are mentioned in Further Reading.

### **Language and pronunciation**

Buddhist texts were composed in and translated into many languages, including Pāli, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Thai, Burmese, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The convention followed here is to cite Buddhist technical terms in their Sanskrit forms except when the discussion refers to Pāli sources at which time Pāli forms are used. Transliteration from languages such as Sanskrit and Pāli requires the use of diacritics. This is because the 26 letters of the English alphabet are insufficient to represent the larger number of characters in Asian languages. A horizontal line (macron) above a vowel lengthens it, such that the character 'ā' is pronounced as in 'far' rather than 'fat'. For the most part, the other marks do not affect pronunciation sufficiently to be of any concern, with the following exceptions:

c pronounced 'ch' as in 'choose'

ṣ or ś pronounced 'sh' as in 'shoes'

ñ pronounced 'ny' as in Spanish 'mañana'

A dot beneath a consonant (ṭ, ḍ, etc.) indicates that the tongue touches the roof of the mouth when pronouncing these letters, to give the characteristic sound of English when spoken with an Indian accent.

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**1. Buddhism in Asia**

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# Chapter 1

## Buddhist morality

Morality is woven into the fabric of Buddhist teachings and there is no major branch or school of Buddhism that fails to emphasize the importance of the moral life. The scriptures of Buddhism in every language speak eloquently of virtues such as non-violence and compassion, and the Buddhist version of the 'Golden Rule' counsels us not to do anything to others we would not like done to ourselves. Although newcomers to Buddhism are often struck by the variety of the different Asian traditions, as divergent in form as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, at the level of moral teachings there is much common ground. Some might disagree, but my own view is that we can speak of a common moral core underlying the divergent customs, practices, and philosophical teachings of the different schools. This core is composed of the principles and precepts, and the values and virtues expounded by the Buddha in the 5th century BCE and which continue to guide the conduct of some 350 million Buddhists around the world today. The purpose of this first chapter is to review these basic moral teachings.

### Dharma

The ultimate foundation for Buddhist ethics is Dharma. Dharma has many meanings, but the underlying notion is of a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe. Dharma can best be translated as 'natural law', a term that captures

## The Four Noble Truths

*Duḥkha* – All existence is suffering.

*Samudāya* – Suffering is caused by craving.

*Nirodha* – Suffering can have an end.

*Mārga* – The way to the end of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

both its main senses, namely as the principle of order and regularity seen in the behaviour of natural phenomena, and also the idea of a universal moral law whose requirements have been revealed by enlightened beings such as the Buddha (note that Buddha claimed only to have discovered Dharma, not to have invented it). Every aspect of life is regulated by Dharma, from the succession of the seasons to the movement of the planets and constellations. Dharma is neither caused by nor under the control of a supreme being, and the gods themselves are subject to its laws, as was the Buddha. In the moral order, Dharma is manifest in the law of karma, which, as we shall see below, governs the way moral deeds affect individuals in present and future lives. Living in accordance with Dharma and implementing its requirements is thought to lead to happiness, fulfilment, and salvation; neglecting or transgressing it is said to lead to endless suffering in the cycle of rebirth (*samsāra*).

In his first sermon, the Buddha was said to have ‘turned the wheel of the Dharma’ and given doctrinal expression to the truth about how things are in reality. It was in this discourse that the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths, the last of which is the Noble Eightfold Path which leads to nirvana. The Path has three divisions – Morality (*śīla*), Meditation (*samādhi*), and Insight (*prajñā*) – from which it can be seen that morality is an integral component of the path to nirvana.

## The Eightfold Path and its Three Divisions

|                      |   |                               |
|----------------------|---|-------------------------------|
| 1. Right View        | } | Insight ( <i>prajñā</i> )     |
| 2. Right Resolve     |   |                               |
| 3. Right Speech      | } | Morality ( <i>śīla</i> )      |
| 4. Right Action      |   |                               |
| 5. Right Livelihood  |   |                               |
| 6. Right Effort      | } | Meditation ( <i>samādhi</i> ) |
| 7. Right Mindfulness |   |                               |
| 8. Right Meditation  |   |                               |

Buddhist morality

## Karma

The doctrine of karma is concerned with the ethical implications of Dharma, in particular those relating to the consequences of moral behaviour. Karma is not a system of rewards and punishments meted out by God but a kind of natural law akin to the law of gravity. In popular usage in the West, karma is thought of simply as the good and bad things that happen to a person, a little like good and bad luck. However, this oversimplifies what for Buddhists is a complex of interrelated ideas which embraces both ethics and belief in reincarnation. The literal meaning of the Sanskrit word karma is 'action', but karma as a religious concept is concerned not with just any actions but with actions of a particular kind. Karmic actions are moral actions, and the Buddha defined karma by reference to moral choices and the acts consequent upon them. He stated, 'It is intention (*cetanā*), O monks, that I call karma; having willed one acts through body, speech, or mind' (A.iii.415).

Moral actions are unlike other actions in that they have both transitive and intransitive effects. The transitive effect is seen in the direct impact moral actions have on others; for example, when we kill or steal, someone is deprived of his life or property. The intransitive effect is seen in the way moral actions affect the agent. According to Buddhism, human beings have free will, and in the exercise of free choice they engage in self-determination. In a very real sense, individuals create themselves through their moral choices. By freely and repeatedly choosing certain sorts of things, individuals shape their characters, and through their characters their futures. As the English proverb has it: 'Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny.' The process of creating karma may be likened to the work of a potter who moulds the clay into a finished shape: the soft clay is one's character, and when we make moral choices we hold ourselves in our hands and shape our natures for good or ill. It is not hard to see how even within the course of a single lifetime particular patterns of behaviour lead inexorably to certain results. Great works of literature reveal how the fate that befalls the protagonists is due not to chance but to a character flaw that leads to a tragic series of events. The remote effects of karmic choices are referred to as the 'maturation' (*vipāka*) or 'fruit' (*phala*) of the karmic act. The metaphor is an agricultural one: performing good and bad deeds is like planting seeds that will fruit at a later date. Othello's jealousy, Macbeth's ruthless ambition, and Hamlet's hesitation and self-doubt would all be seen by Buddhists as karmic seeds, and the tragic outcome in each case would be the inevitable 'fruit' of the choices these character-traits predisposed the individual to make. Individuals are thus to a large extent the authors of their good and bad fortune.

Not all the consequences of what a person does are experienced in the lifetime in which the deeds are performed. Karma that has been accumulated but not yet experienced is carried forward to the next life, or even many lifetimes ahead. Certain key aspects of a person's

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next rebirth are thought of as karmically determined. These include the family into which one is born, one's social status, physical appearance, and of course, one's character and personality, since these are simply carried over from the previous life. The doctrine of karma, however, does not claim that everything that happens to a person is karmically determined. Many of the things that happen in life – like winning a raffle or catching a cold – may simply be random events or accidents. Karma does not determine precisely what will happen or how anyone will react to what happens, and individuals are always free to resist previous conditioning and establish new patterns of behaviour.

What, then, makes an action good or bad? From the Buddha's definition above, it can be seen to be largely a matter of intention and choice. The psychological springs of motivation are described in Buddhism as 'roots', and there are said to be three good roots and three bad roots. Actions motivated by greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*) are bad (*akuśala*), while actions motivated by their opposites – non-attachment, benevolence, and understanding – are good (*kuśala*). Making progress to enlightenment, however, is not simply a matter of having good intentions, and evil is sometimes done by people who act from the highest motives. Good intentions, therefore, must find expression in right actions, and right actions are basically those that are wholesome and do no harm to either oneself or others. The kinds of actions that fail these requirements are prohibited in various sets of precepts, about which more will be said below.

Buddhist morality

### **Merit**

Karma can be either good or bad. Buddhists speak of good karma as 'merit' (*puṇya*; Pāli, *puñña*), and much effort is expended in acquiring it (its opposite, bad karma, is known as *pāpa*). Some Buddhists picture merit as a kind of spiritual capital – like money in a bank account – whereby credit is built up as the deposit on a



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