

## Buddhist Ethical Theory

Buddhism is strongly concerned with defining morality. As a result, there exists a distinctly Buddhist ethical theory. It is important to note that there are many varieties of Buddhism throughout the world, but I am going to attempt to define the ethical theory that is broad enough to encompass the beliefs of most branches of Buddhism by using the basic, most original tenets of Buddhism. This ethical exploration is a difficult task due to the fact that there is an utter lack of information in Buddhist texts about ethical theory. As Damien Keown suggests in his book *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*, any definition of a Buddhist ethical theory is going to come from a completely Western perspective.<sup>1</sup> While this is unfortunate and could leave room for a certain amount of cultural misunderstanding, it is the only way for ethicists to examine the ethical theory of Buddhism. Although there are certain areas in Buddhist ethics that can fit into the Western concepts of ethics (utilitarianism, virtue ethics, etc.), Buddhist ethical theory ultimately defies Western classification and is something completely its own. To explain this ethical theory, I will confine my focus to Dharma, The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and virtues and precepts.

The cornerstone of the Buddhist ethical theory is what is known as Dharma. This is somewhat difficult to give a firm definition in a Western sense, but Keown describes it as “a universal law which governs both the physical and moral order of the universe.”<sup>2</sup> Buddhists believe that the moral requirements mandated in Dharma were discovered by the Buddha.

Dharma is both descriptive and normative, because it both defines how the world actually is and

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1 Damien Keown, *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 37.

2 Ibid., 3.

sets out a moral path that people should follow. Joanna Rogers Macy points out in her journal article, “Dependent Co-arising: The Distinctiveness of Buddhist Ethics,” that in the Buddhist concept of Dharma, ethics (or what Westerners call ethics) and the true nature of the world are inseparable.<sup>3</sup> In a sense, Buddhism could be considered teleological (or goal oriented) in the sense that it is the goal of the Buddhist to reach a level of enlightenment to understand Dharma completely. When the Buddhist has reached such a level of enlightenment, nirvana can be attained.<sup>4</sup> Buddhist scholar Hammalawa Saddhartissa describes enlightenment, “[e]nlightenment consists essentially in knowing things in accordance with reality.”<sup>5</sup> Nirvana means, in a crude sense, that when one dies, one will no longer be simply reincarnated but a part of everything and at the same time nothing in the sense that one's consciousness is gone.

But as stated before, there is also a normative aspect to Dharma. Both Keown and Buddhism scholar James Whitehill argue that Buddhism could fit generally into the Western idea of virtue ethics.<sup>6</sup> Virtue ethics revolves around the idea that “the way to act rightly...is not simply to follow certain kinds of rules, nor seek pleasant consequences, but first and foremost to *be or become* a certain kind of person.”<sup>7</sup> In Buddhism this is expressed by the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The Four Noble Truths outline why it is important to achieve enlightenment, and the Eightfold Path lays out the various ways in which one should behave to achieve enlightenment. The Four Noble Truths are: 1. All existence is suffering. 2. Suffering is caused by craving. 3. Suffering can have end. 4. The way to the end of suffering is the Noble

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3 Joanna Rogers Macy, “Dependent Co-Arising: The Distinctiveness of Buddhist Ethics,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, 1 (Spring 1979): 38-39.

4 Keown, 4.

5 Hammalawa Saddhatissa, *Buddhist Ethics* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997), 15.

6 James Whitehill, “Buddhism and the Virtues,” in *Contemporary Buddhist Ethics*, ed. Damien Keown (Surrey, England: Curzon Press, 2000), 24. and Keown, 32.

7 Keown, 22.

Eightfold Path.<sup>8</sup> The Eightfold Path is split into three categories (although for the sake of scope it is not possible to elaborate on each of these points individually): Insight, Morality, and Meditation. Under Insight are 1. Right View and 2. Right Resolve; under Morality are 3. Right Speech, 4. Right Action, and 5. Right Livelihood; under Meditation are 6. Right Effort, 7. Right Mindfulness, and 8. Right Meditation.<sup>9</sup> If one follows this Eightfold Path, then it is possible to eventually progress toward enlightenment. A Buddhist aspires to act in these ways because they are in accordance with Dharma. According to Buddhist texts, the Buddha followed the Eightfold Path before his own enlightenment.”<sup>10</sup> This can be considered similar to Aristotle's view that one lives in a certain virtuous way because it will lead to a particularly fulfilling life.<sup>11</sup>

However, Buddhist ethics are quite mixed and do not fit perfectly into virtue ethics. Buddhism also lists certain virtues like *Ahimsa*, which essentially means non-violence and respect for life and *Dana*, which means giving or generosity.<sup>12</sup> Keown explains that “[t]he task of the virtues is to counteract negative dispositions” or what Westerners know as vices.<sup>13</sup> This part of the Buddhist ethic has a sort of consequentialist feel to it in that Buddhists strive to maintain these virtues in order to avoid the negative consequences of vices such as violence or greed. Precepts are essentially commands telling what a virtuous person would not do. For example, one of the precepts relating to *Ahimsa* is: “I undertake the precept to refrain from harming living creatures.”<sup>14</sup> This is an almost deontological approach of moral commands like the Ten Commandments in Christianity. However, as Keown points out, this is not a completely

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8 Ibid., 4.

9 Keown, 5.

10 Saddhatissa, 45.

11 Keown, 25.

12 Ibid., 13.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid., 9.

deontological approach because the precepts are supposed to be taken up on a voluntary basis.<sup>15</sup>

Both virtues and precepts are supposed to assist in the gaining of enlightenment through understanding Dharma.

Buddhist ethical theory is extremely complex, and its content cannot be thoroughly explained in the scope of a short essay. The parts of the Buddhist ethical theory that I have summarized are those that seem to be universal across Buddhism. As has been demonstrated, it is not feasible to fit Buddhist ethical theory neatly into Western concepts of ethics. While Buddhism shares enough ethical aspects with virtue ethics to be considered comparable by some scholars, there are also many differences that hinder this comparison, including certain similarities with the conflicting ideas of deontology and consequentialism. The ethical theory of Buddhism is something different than Western philosophy.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 8.

## Bibliography

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