

Buddhist Ethical Concerns: The problem of the Universal and the Particular

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ABSTRACT

The texts of world religions that survive over the centuries are being tested in our present time as never before. The questions center on the problem of whether one can use them to deal with contemporary issues and the ethical challenges of a world that has on one level been moving into dependence on technological advances and structures and on another level struggling with deeply ingrained social patterns. Can the religious literature provide answers? Do these texts posit the claim for universal ethical values that apply in all times to all situations? If there are universals that can be identified, then it should be possible to seek for expressions of them in the oldest extant literature as well as in contemporary interpretations and practices. To be truly universal, is it not the case that the interpretation must be as universal as the stated rule? It is not difficult to point out the many problems involved in this search for a universal that extends over time and through numerous applications.

For Buddhist studies, the attempt to find support for a universal ethical system has not yet been successful. Even when one reduces the ethical dimension to a very few statements, that on the surface seem to be acceptable to all, the construction of a system proves to be elusive. One of the elements of a Buddhist ethic is the variety of beings who must be accommodated within it. The Buddhist Sangha was made up of lay and monastic members. Some rules apply to the monks and nuns but are not incumbent on laity. In the Vinaya, we find that gender plays a role. Monks have one set of rules and nuns have another. In the Pali canon, there are also numerous other beings that have behavior that produces karma and retribution. Even animals are included in the former lives of Sakyamuni Buddha and these creatures displayed ethical responses to life situations. Chthonic creatures such as Yaksas were depicted as acting in either positive or negative ways. There was another category of beings, described in great length in the Mahayana texts. These were the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas of this world and realms extending outward in an ever expanding cosmos. Keown has labeled the acts of these Buddhas and bodhisattvas to be "mythic." They function both inside the everyday world and outside it in a cosmic sphere. This transcendent nature of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas allowed them to transcend the normal rules of behavior and they could violate the stated proscriptions without harm to themselves or others. All of this vast array of beings and humans make up the universe as seen by the Buddhists. If we are to suggest a universal ethic, it would have to be a rule that includes all of the beings described in the texts: spirits, laity, monastics, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas.

In part, this difficulty of establishing a basic, unchanging ethical position for Buddhism, results from the length and variety of the various Buddhist canons. The differences to be found in the Pali canon and in the Mahayana texts have yet to be fully determined. Even more problematic is the fact that the differences inherent

within each of the canons, has not been dealt with in a systematic fashion. In the past century, there was research that sought to undertake this task. Notable among those who tried to provide a guide to the ethical complexity of Buddhist materials was Professor Ono. While he was one of the most learned scholars of his time, even he limited his work to the Chinese canon and avoided many of the cross-canonic challenges. He identified 200 texts, that is, about ten percent of the total number of titles in the Chinese canon that were seen to contain the core of the ethical teachings of Mahayana Buddhism.¹ These titles are almost all translations from Sanskrit and so we understand that he was dealing with Indic material as it appeared in Chinese translations. As a pioneer in this study, he tried valiantly to chart a method for dealing with the material in these hundreds of documents and thousands of pages. As a first step, he discerned that his 200 selected texts could be classified into seventeen types. David Chappell, in commenting on this attempt, points out that we cannot assume that there were seventeen distinct lineages of ethics within Mahayana.² The seventeen divisions cited by Ono are his technical analysis of the content and style of texts; they do not seem to represent clear descriptions of practices and doctrine within the tradition. Damien Keown's work gives us some hint of the difficulties when he deals with the 52 rules of conduct in one text, the *Bodhisattvabhumi*.³ Not only do we have 52 rules in just one document, we can find countless interpretations in the subsequent commentaries. This complexity alerts us to the many issues we face in any attempt to establish a unified theory of ethics in Buddhist communities.

Charles Hallisey turns his attention to the Pali canon of Theravada and warns against assuming that the tradition has a single moral theory. He suggests that scholars can never, in the abstract, find the nature of Buddhist ethics. The Theravada tradition, he maintains, is pluralistic in that each theory is ethically particular.⁴ Chisholm set forward this idea of particularism which he defined as situations where we accept particular examples of knowledge as true.⁵ We can do this even when we have no basis for proving that the knowledge is correct. In order to make a valid claim, the particularists understand that we must be able to identify an instance of knowledge and then use formal reasoning to establish the validity. The Pali canon presents us with a wealth of examples of knowledge, examples of moral teaching based on particular events. From this array of discourses, it is understandable that they often present conflicting methods of dealing with the immediate case in point. Since this is apparent in the many stories and statements in the Pali Canon, Hallisey maintains that in the midst of such inconsistencies, it is not possible to say that the Buddhists had a clear and defined method. There is no general basis for establishing the essential quality of morality. Hallisey is not alone in this view nor is it an evaluation that is limited to Buddhism. W.D. Ross takes a similar position with regard to any moral principles; he does not believe it is possible to determine that some moral principles can be ranked above others. If as Ross maintains, it is never possible to "discover any consistency in things which we take to matter morally" then we see the challenge to an idea of a universal ethic.⁶

In opposition to this approach of Hallisey, Kevin Schilbrock argues that any teaching of proper conduct implies a form of moral reasoning and justification. He refers in his statements to the work of Russell Sizemore and Donald Swearer.⁷ There we find the description of the two basic approaches to the study of ethics in Buddhism. One is followed by the historians, those who believe that scholars must look to the

historical research for an understanding of the textual and cultural elements of a tradition like Theravada Buddhism. Among those who take this stand is Hallisey. There is a second approach which Sizemore labels as ethicists, that is the philosophical side of the teaching as opposed to the historical and cultural. He maintains that the historians are primarily concerned with how belief shapes behavior and this is the method of dealing with faith and culture. On the other hand the ethicists and philosophers are those who compare forms of reasoning and thus try to define the relationship between faith and culture. Schilbrock worries that Hallisey has identified himself as a historian and has taken a route of study that ignores the philosophical implications in the formal reasoning or statements made in the canon. Such a separation of the philosophical and historical would result, says Schilbrock, in an "outdated positivism."⁸ These are well-worn arguments within the field of religious study but the fact that they are still under discussion alerts us to the fact that the issue is a real and cogent one.

If Hallisey is correct that the Pali canon presents us with a series of particular events to which the Buddha responded without relying on a general principle, then we should explore the ramifications of such a position. In this light, we can consider the Vinaya rules. They are established for the monastics and are encased within a set of narratives that explain the specific situation which generated the necessity of having a guide for behavior. It does appear that in every instance of a Vinaya entry, the Buddha was responding to a specific problem that had arisen among those who had left the householder life. The appeal to the Buddha to settle the claims of misconduct indicates that the Sangha had no other recourse for settling the issues. There seems to have been no clearly defined theory which could be applied to any situation and a solution discovered by reference to a general moral concept. As the number of cases increased, it was true that the monastics had a more defined way of dealing with the normal course of daily life at that time and in that place. Schilbrock's statement that no matter how particular the case, the moral reasoning which lay behind the rulings of the Buddha had to take some form. I am supposing that he sees the possibility of determining this formal reasoning from an analysis of the rules and stories. However, from the historical point of view a serious problem remains. While the Vinaya rules of the various schools were similar, there does not appear to have been a general theory which could make these rules applicable throughout the expanding Buddhist world. There is no proof that the Vinayas preserved in Chinese texts which are similar to the Pali Canon Vinaya, were ever followed in any monastery in East Asia. One of the ironies of Chinese Buddhism is the so-called Vinaya School, where scholars studied the texts but never attempted to follow each and every rule. Was it the lack of a general theory and the specificity to tropical India of many of the rules, that made it impossible to maintain the ancient Vinaya in the northern centers? The thousands of monks and nuns in the regions beyond India seem never to have found in the Vinaya texts, a formal method of reasoning which would give them the authority to enforce the ancient sets of rules. The matter being discussed here is not so much the problem of imitating life styles in distant place and over long period of time. It is the issue of whether Buddhist Vinaya or moral precepts resulted from particular instances or were created with a general theory. On the surface, the development of the Vinaya seems to support the idea that it was a collection of particular examples and was not a construction relying on deductions from an accepted formal framework. If the Buddhist communities could not discover the reasoning for following a well-known

set of rules, will contemporary scholars be able to accomplish the feat? The Vinaya story over time seems to support Hallisey's contention.

There are many Buddhists who are assured that the tradition provides universal proscription against killing. This has raised many concerns regarding the death penalty for convicted criminals, engaging in military activities endorsed by the government, and abortion. It is abortion which has been of growing importance within the political and religious life of the U.S. The Buddhist communities from ancient times to the present have faced this issue and have been challenged, as we are in the present time to define precisely the nature of abortion. Is it justified when the mother's life is at stake? When is the embryo considered to be a being? Robert Florida and William LaFleur⁹ looked at the situation in Japan where religious ceremonies have been established for the aborted embryos. Damien Keown has objected to those studies which would seek for a "Middle Way" regarding abortion. He maintains that abortion and killing of a human are considered one and the same by the Vinaya and thus there can be no "Middle Way."¹⁰ An excellent new work by Giulio Agostini is in progress for a Ph.D. in the Group in Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. I do not wish to report in detail on his research until it is released, except to say that he will provide us with a wide range of interpretations regarding abortion within the Indian and Tibetan literature. The arguments and the practices among Buddhist practitioners should be a signal that even in what might appear to be a simple universal statement there is ample room for debate.

While Schilbrock contends that there is a formal moral reasoning possible within Buddhism, he does not provide us with a description of it. David Chappell takes up the challenge and searches for the possible reason for moral action in Buddhism and explores two possible bases. One base for action is compassion and another is based on soteriology. When he examines the texts on compassion, problems begin to emerge. Compassion appears as one of the Four Immeasurables.¹¹ Since the technical use of terms in Buddhist texts is tied to the numbered lists, Chappell is quite right to make note of the exact meaning of the term compassion and the context in which it appears. The problem that arises from the textual work is the fact that the Digha Nikaya tells us that the Four Immeasurables, including compassion do not lead to liberation. They only allow the practitioner to be born in the Brahma heavens and as the sutta states that birth is described as being completely different than the path of the Buddha which

leads unfailingly to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to super-knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is the Noble Eightfold Path.

If compassion only gives an interim higher birth and does not lead to enlightenment, it cannot be at the core of the reasoning for moral action. Instead, as Chappell indicates, the highest importance is given to soteriology, liberation. Action must be followed which will lead to complete enlightenment. As we have already observed, Buddhism has multiple canons and so we need to look at both the Pali canon and the Mahayana texts to see if compassion is treated in a different fashion in the two.

Hallisey has made a strong argument that the ethical discourse in the Pali Canon cannot be considered as a single system, it is rather a complex of various approaches and sometime conflicting ideals. The same must be said for the Mahayana tradition. It cannot be viewed as a unitary system. There are a variety of ways in which the texts of the Mahayana describe the ways to achieve liberation from the bondage that brings suffering. One of the early family of texts was the *Prajnaparamita* group. In these, Chappell points to a key passage.

Wise Bodhisattvas, coursing thus, reflect on non-production,
And yet, while doing so, engender in themselves the great
compassion, which is, however, free from any notion of a being.
Thereby they practice wisdom, the highest perfection.¹²

Here we see that compassion is considered to have two aspects, one in the Four Immeasurables and another within the actions of a Bodhisattva. Only an enlightened Bodhisattva has the ability to practice compassion that is free from any notion of a being. A key term in this passage is the word “practice.” There is by no means a full agreement on the definition of this “practice.” Geogre Dreyfus is of the opinion that moral action must be tied to meditation.¹³ He explores meditation and daily life in Tibet in an attempt to understand the ethical backdrop for this type of yogic practice. But he admits at the outset that while the Tibetan Buddhists have developed what he calls a “substantive ethical system...” they lack “...a theoretical reflection on the nature of their ethical beliefs and practices.” He makes clear that scholars must construct the logic of the ethical system without finding support for this logic in the writings of the tradition itself. Luis Gomez in his masterful work on the *Gandavyuha* also gives us a Mahayana definition of the actions necessary for enlightenment. In that sutra Gomez finds the following:

Having understood that the world's true nature is mind, you
display bodies of your own in harmony with the world. Having
realised that this world is like a dream, and that all Buddhas are
like mere reflections, that all principles are like an echo, you move
unimpeded in the world. In an instant you show your own body
even to [all] the people in the three times. Yet, in your mind there
is no [mental] process of duality and you preach the Principle in
all directions.¹⁴

Here we find that it is the supernormal achievements that allow the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to perform the acts which lead to liberation.

When we review the Mahayana position with regard to actions which are considered to be auspicious, we find that compassion is present but only as a product of something more important. The important matter is practice which must ultimately be tied to some form of yogic meditation. And even in the yogic meditation we find variety of methods with the one of the branches of Mahayana clearly stating that the ethical dimension must be lodged firmly within the great achievements of the practitioners that allow the mind to full grasp the nature of reality. Ronald Davidson takes us even one more step in his work on esoteric Buddhism. There, he postulates

that the Siddha tradition of asceticism diverted from traditional monasticism and the true achievements of liberation were seen to shift to a lay group.¹⁵

What conclusions are we to extract from such an array of positions and practices? It seems safe to say that Buddhism cannot be viewed as a single approach or a single philosophical stance. If there is a universal ethic in Buddhism it cannot be established on the basis of a normative system that was to be found throughout the religion. The search for the underlying basis of ethical and moral action also shows us how complex the problem. Chappell's assertion that ethical action is rooted in whatever brings liberation, seems to be one of the most promising approaches. But even here, we must understand that he is primarily making use of Mahayana texts. It is not surprise that there are a myriad of descriptions of what actions bring liberation, from monastic meditation to asceticism of Siddhas. When all of this has been stated, where is the average person in everyday life? Thus, we have sets of rules and guidelines for action that produce merit and benefit, even when the agent of the action is not a fully enlightened one. We can understand why Buddhism has always prized the monastic tradition and looked to the ascetics and the Siddhas to achieve those states that can produce liberation. Even though lay people acting in accord with vows cannot be assured of the highest achievements, such acts are considered a necessary, if not sufficient step, toward liberation. While it may be disconcerting to consider all of the varieties of concepts in the Buddhist canons, I do not think it to be a statement of failure in Buddhism with regard to morality. Is it the case that the effort of Buddhists over many centuries to fully explore the implications of human actions is in itself a truly moral approach? The ability to stand clear of simple rules of behavior and to acknowledge that the human condition is an ever changing array of needs, may be the greatest strength of Buddhism. Responding in every time and every place to the particular need of the moment should never be seen as morally deficient to obeying a set of universal rules.

Notes

¹ Ono, Hoodoo, *Daijo kaikyo no kenkyu* (Tokyo: Risosha, 1954): 8-44

² David W. Chappell "Are there Seventeen Mahayana Ethics?" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol 3, 1996

³ Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 6.

⁴ Charles Hallisey, "Ethical Particularism in Theravada Buddhism," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 3 (1996): 32-43.

⁵ Roderick Chisholm, *The Problem of the Criterion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1973)

⁶ Jonathan Dancy, "An ethic of prima facie duties," *A Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 219

⁷ Russell F. Sizemore, "Comparative Religious Ethics as a Field: Faith, Culture, and Reason in Ethics," in *Ethics, Wealth, and Salvation: A Study in Buddhist Social Ethics*, ed. Russell F. Sizemore and Donald K. Swearer (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1990), 87-

⁸ Kevin Schilbrack "The General and the Particular in Theravada Ethics: A Response to Charles Hallisey" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol 4, 1997.

⁹ LaFleur, William R. *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

¹⁰ Keown, Damien. *Buddhism and Abortion*. London: The Macmillan Press, 1998

¹¹ Gunapala Dharmasiri, Fundamentals of Buddhist Ethics (Antioch, California: Golden Leaves, 1989): 42-52bb

¹² Edward Conze, tr., *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary* (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973): 11-12

¹³ George Dreyfus, "Meditation as Ethical Activity". *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol 2: 1995 25.54

¹⁴ Luis Gomez, "Selected Verses from the Gandavyuha: Text, Critical Apparatus and Translation" (1967 Yale Ph.D. dissertation, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan): lxxvi-lxxxv

¹⁵ Ronald M. Davidson, "Reframing Sahaja: Genre, representation, ritual and heritage" *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (Forthcoming).

Realize that the mind is insatiable, and that it constantly strives for more, thus adding to its transgressions and mistakes. The bodhisattva is not like this; he thinks often of being satisfied with what he has, and he is peaceful in poverty and upholds the Dharma. Wisdom is his only concern.

– *Buddhism: Pure and Simple*, Hsing Yun, p.63