

# ETHICS AND HUMANISTIC BUDDHISM

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## ABSTRACT

*The Buddhist tradition, like all religious systems, has been challenged to provide answers for the problems of society. Part of this pressure on Buddhism to deal with social and economic issues has come from Europe and North America, where these matters have been a major focus of attention in philosophy as well as political theory. This paper cannot provide answers to the many questions that arise from this contact of cultures. It is only an attempt to indicate the nature of some of these problems and to help define the important tasks of a scholarly community that wishes to deal with Humanistic Buddhism. The issues raised by those who are researching the field of comparative ethics should be given consideration as the focus for future conferences such as this one.*

From the earliest days of its history in East Asia, Buddhism was forced to face serious opposition from the Confucian tradition that attacked the ascetic and monastic practices of the Indian religion as being destructive to family and society. When in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the social agenda of European religious bodies was added to the local Confucian pressures, the Buddhist leaders of China felt the need to give more specific answers to the question of how their teachings were related to human problems. Humanistic Buddhism, in the person of Tai Hsu, arose as one response to the growing awareness of the social ethics of Europe and America. These influences made a major impact on China during the period of colonial expansion and Christian missionary activity. Tai Hsu was deeply affected by them. At the heart of this attempt to deal with the very fabric of society, is the ethical dimension. This issue of ethics has been, and will remain, a major concern of Humanistic Buddhism. James Whitehill puts it forcefully:

Contemporary Buddhism increasingly seeks to make itself understood in modern terms and to respond to contemporary conditions. Buddhism's legitimization in the West can be partially met by demonstrating that Buddhist morality is a virtue-oriented, character-based, community-focused ethics, commensurate with the Western "ethics of virtue" tradition.<sup>1</sup>

He finally states:

As a result, the legitimization of the Buddhist Dharma as a whole is at risk in the West, for no religious or soteriological philosophy without a developed ethic can be fully and widely legitimized in Western culture.<sup>2</sup>

There can be little question that the ethical dimension stands at the very heart of European philosophical discourse and Buddhism as it enters into the cultural sphere of this discourse will be forced to address the matter. The vocabulary and the history of the ethical considerations will be European and this creates a problem for Buddhist teachings which must be translated and appraised in this new environment. The encounter between the Buddhist tradition and the European ethical approach has been

long enough to create some history for us to examine. It is the case that one of the first groups to respond to the reappraisal of how Buddhism should react to the contemporary world was China's Humanistic Buddhism. There are other movements within Buddhism that have given answer to the social questions. An early pioneer in the discourse was Dr. Ambedkar, the famous founder of the Neo Dhamma movement in India. He was influenced, like Tai Hsu, by the developments in Europe. His approach was more radical than the Chinese development, as can be seen in way he redefined the Four Noble Truths. This new interpretation used a vocabulary that was well known among the social reformers of Europe, and the words of Ambedkar can be traced in the ethical and social debates of the past two centuries in nations such as France and Russia. Ambedkar took the basic framework of Buddhist doctrine for his political discussions. For example, he used the Four Noble Truths as the foundation for his message. When he affirmed the First Noble Truth of Suffering, he did not use the traditional explanation of a mental condition but rather turned to the world around him and saw the Suffering as injustice and poverty. Suffering as a Noble Truth was put into the social and economic sphere of everyday life. When Ambedkar looked at the Second Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering, he once again reflected the discourses of Europe. The Cause of Suffering was not taken to be part of the function of an individual psyche. The Cause was identified as the institutions that controlled economic and social life. From his perspective, the Cause of Suffering was to be found in the very structure of the establishment. The Cause was the colonial government of Britain and the social system of India that still held to caste distinctions. When he reviewed the Third Noble Truth, his definition was purely European and reflected the revolutionary spirit that had fueled much of the political life starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and most strongly represented in the French Revolution. Ambedkar proclaimed the Solution to Suffering was embodied in the rallying cry of the revolutionaries, "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity." He followed this by turning to the Fourth Noble Truth, the Path of achieving the solution to Suffering and urged his followers to "Educate", "Agitate," and "Organize."<sup>3</sup> We can see that this approach was quite different in tone from that of Chinese Humanistic Buddhism but represented an attempt to achieve some of the same goals of putting the Buddhist insight directly into the material world of everyday life. Ambedkar achieved a rather notable success and through his efforts Buddhism was able to find an audience in India for the first time in centuries.

In more recent times, a new movement of social awareness has emerged under the title of "Engaged" Buddhists. This loosely knit group has added new items to the agenda...ecology, bioethics, gender, and global industry. Social oppression is seen as the results of the structure of economic and political organizations. The destruction of the environment of the world is viewed as one result of corporate and government policies. Led by an international community that draws upon the teachings of Buddhism as well as the rhetoric of postmodern thought in Europe and America, "Engaged" Buddhists are the most recent manifestation of this desire to use the teachings of the Buddha within the material and social sphere.

Such developments over the last century raise the question of whether Buddhist teachings can be called upon to provide the ethical underpinnings for reform. Here we turn away from the social organizers and look to the philosophers to help us

determine the appropriateness of the role of Buddhism in these discourses. The scholars of the modern ethical studies dealing with the issues of ecology and globalization do not all agree that Buddhism has answers for these problems. Ian Harris states

...the canonical writings of Indic Buddhism possess elements that may harmonize with a *de facto* ecological consciousness. However, their basic attitude towards the causal process drastically reduces the possibility of developing an authentically Buddhist environmental ethic. The classical treatment of causation fails to resolve successfully the tension between symmetry and asymmetry of relations and this has tended to mean that attempts to inject a *telos*, or sense of purpose, into the world are likely to founder. The agenda of eco-Buddhism is examined in the light of this fact and found wanting.<sup>4</sup>

This appraisal of Buddhism as a source of support for the ecological crisis is sobering. Prof. Harris, as a philosopher, has struck at the very heart of the Buddhist doctrine, the theory of causation. He cannot see a way for Buddhism, as defined in the literature of Pali and Sanskrit, to provide the sense of purpose that is needed for those who want to deal with ecological issues. The reason for this alleged inadequacy of Buddhism in the sphere of trying to save rain forests and preserve natural environments, lies in the fact that the religion does not have a causal theory which can make a clear distinction between what Harris describes as “symmetry” and “asymmetry.” In other words, he does not believe that Buddhist causal theory can distinguish, for example, the “good” from the “not good.” Without this distinction, it is hard for him to see how Buddhism can give us a *telos*, or a sense of purpose. If Indic Buddhism lacks a sense of purpose based on distinctions, then Harris comes to the conclusion that “eco-Buddhism” cannot be a major force in the current discourse, since he states that:

The minimum qualification for an authentic Buddhist ethics is that it is able to construe causation in such a way that goal-oriented activity makes sense.<sup>5</sup>

If we turn from the ecological sphere to the bioethical one, it is the work of Dr. Keown that provides an example of how contemporary philosophers are dealing with Buddhist thought. Like Ambedkar, Tai Hsu, and the Engaged Buddhists, he has turned to the European sphere of ethical development in order to search for meaning in the Buddhist teachings. The work of Keown seems to be much influenced by Aristotle. That is, he operates on the basic assumption that ethical behavior among humans is only realized through the cultivation of certain ways of acting. It is necessary for people to determine which actions are reasonable and productive for “good” and which are irrational and destructive. This goal of deciding how to act is the basis for ethics as Keown sees it. The guidance needed for reaching the goal can be achieved objectively by focusing on what is “good” for humanity and thinking through the actions needed to bring that “good” from a potential state to an actual working model in life.<sup>6</sup> Like Harris, he believes that there must be a way to define a distinction between the symmetry, here the “good” and the asymmetry “the destructive.” I think it is possible to put Keown’s approach into the pattern of the Four Noble Truths, using the Aristotelian model. That is, we define the First Noble Truth of Suffering to be the

opposite of the "good." For Keown, the basic "good" within the bioethical realm of thought is life. From this point of view we can follow the advice of Aristotle as we reflect on the Second Noble Truth of the Cause of Suffering. Having found the Cause of what is not "good" we can rationally and systematically look for the Solution and finally reach a conclusion about the best Path to follow to bring about the "good." For Keown, this solution will be the fulfillment and preservation of life. However appealing this may sound, it leaves us with the unresolved issue of how can we determine that "life" is the "good" within the framework of Buddhist teachings of causality. In other words the problem of symmetry and asymmetry raised by Harris can be applied to the bioethical as well as to the ecological problem.

As we can see, the matter of determining what is "good" is essential in the current philosophical discourses on human problems. In this respect, the work of Joseph Margolis helps us to see more clearly the arguments that are appearing in the research on Buddhist ethics. Margolis holds to a position of many analytical philosophers in Europe and North America, when he implies that our knowledge is always determined by what he calls "textualism." Our knowledge is produced by the context that we construct with our language and practices. The "good" which is the goal of action as described by Keown, requires that we be able to see alternatives that can be judged to be "not good." The knowledge of what is "good," requires in Margolis' system some type of "textualism", boundaries and alternatives based on words and actions.

Harris finds it difficult to see how eco-Buddhism can be justified, Keown struggles to define ethics strictly within the sphere of the search for the "good", and Margolis notes the necessity of "textualism." How then are we to take the concept of Emptiness in Buddhism? If Emptiness implies that there are no perspectives that have boundaries, then in the sense of "textualism" any perspective is meaningless in terms of being "good" or "not good." If all things are mutually dependent on one another then "good" and "not good" are not basic premises on which to build an ethic. When seen in light of the description presented by Margolis, this doctrine of Emptiness creates a situation where Buddhism does not have "textualism." Thus, one would suppose that Margolis would maintain that in such a tradition there is no relational condition with firm boundaries where the world of human experience can be reached through cognition.

Other ethical positions show us just how complex the problems are for us to define the Buddhist "ethic." Bernard Williams asks a question which should be kept in mind as we go forward with this argument:

If there is such a thing as the truth about the subject matter of ethics—the truth, we might say, about the ethical—why is there any expectation that it should be simple? In particular, why should it be conceptually simple, using only one or two ethical concepts, such as *duty* or *good state of affairs*, rather than many? Perhaps we need as many concepts to describe it as we find we need, and no fewer<sup>8</sup>

It seems to me that Williams also brings to the table, a serious question about "textualism." In his discussion about the tasks of the philosophers when dealing with

ethics, he warns us that the drive to reduce our ethical ideas to a limited number such as the two "duty" and "good state of affairs" is not a proper solution. His statement:

There is one motive for reductivism that does not operate simply on the ethical, or on the nonethical, but tends to reduce every consideration to one basic kind. This rests on an assumption about rationality, to the effect that two considerations cannot be rationally weighed against one another unless there is a common consideration in terms of which they can be compared. This assumption is at once very powerful and utterly baseless.<sup>9</sup>

If we consider the Buddhist situation with regard to the ethical arguments among the philosophers, then where can we site this Asian tradition? Can it be seen in terms of an ethic based on "duty?" This was the area that most attracted the criticism of the Confucian ethicists who had a clearly defined set of regulations in society and family that were considered to be ones "duty." While Buddhism has a set of Precepts, it is difficult to make the case that these lists of actions fall under the heading of a "duty." Accepting the Precepts is preceded by a voluntary vow of individuals who choose to act in accord with them. This would imply that the Precepts are not Commandments to be observed without exception and without question. In the normal meaning of Commandments, there is no option left open beyond obeying or not obeying. Disobedience in a strict system of "duty" is followed by punishment and exclusion. Within Humanistic Buddhism, the option of taking a vow to follow the Five Precepts is strongly advised but the question of punishing those who do not take these vows is not a part of the discourse. It is true that the doctrine of karma operating like a Natural Law will have results for all actions. Thus the person who opts not to follow the Precepts will have consequences for the future, perhaps including unfortunate births. This consequence is not left in the hands of someone who enforces the rules of ethical behavior and so there is no specific punishment set forth for those who do not follow the Precepts.

If Buddhism cannot be placed under the category of an ethic based on "duty" then the question is whether it belongs under the other major category, that of the ethics of virtue.<sup>10</sup> This idea also derives from Aristotle who defined virtue as a disposition or inclination of character that operates internally with regard to all actions or feelings. There are some scholars who believe that this form of ethics comes closest to the Buddhist model. A person of virtue, or enlightened insight, acts in ways that provide for the good of all others. Such a person is not acting in accord with a set of commandments but by the nature of personal inclinations will not violate what is helpful or good for others. The Bodhisattva, whether in the *Jataka* tales of the Pali Canon or the teachings of the Mahayana schools, is a possible example of this ethics of virtue. The very psyche of the Bodhisattva leads toward actions that are effective and necessary for the well being of the world. J.B. Baillie defines this type of ethic, when he says:

..the final end of moral discipline is the reform not the suppression of desire.<sup>11</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh seems to support this same idea when he infers that a concern for other beings is the natural expression of Buddhist practice.<sup>12</sup> Jones echoes the same

sentiments when he refers to “cultivating character.”<sup>13</sup> Master Hsing Yun puts it very well in his quote from Man Ch’eng, a fellow monk in China:

“I’m perfectly willing.”

And follows it by his own statement:

“I am perfectly willing to become a Buddhist monk, perfectly willing to study, perfectly willing to be an ascetic, and perfectly willing to accept all blame and wrong.”<sup>14</sup>

David Kalupahana raises questions about considering Buddhism as having a Virtue Ethic in the sense of Aristotle. Instead he prefers to think of the Precepts and other teachings as a form of “moral pragmatism.” That is, Buddhists who decide to follow the Precepts do so because they know that acting in accord with those prescriptions will benefit themselves and others. While the acts are moral they are also pragmatic since they produce the desired results of benefit for all. Therefore, he concludes that virtues are central to moral practice but are not themselves the object of the practice. Barnhart disagrees with Kalupahana pointing out that the Precepts go far beyond just social action, they are directed toward achieving Nirvana, final enlightenment.<sup>15</sup>

Here are a few of the thorny problems that Humanistic Buddhism must address. Are Buddhist ethics commensurate with European and Aristotelian ideas of duty and virtue? Is Kalupahana correct when he says that Buddhist behavior is “moral pragmatism?” Is the Buddhism defined in the texts such as the Pali canon a real option for contemporary practitioners? What are the powers of ordinary people in regard to moral obligations? The answers to such questions are complicated and deserve a much fuller treatment than this short paper. There are no conclusions to be given at this point, except to say that Buddhists should be careful not to lose nerve in the face of the claims of the ethical positions of European philosophy and theology. Bernstein has pointed out that if Buddhism and the Aristotelian ethics turn out to be incommensurable, that is if they lack a common perspective, this is not the end of dialogue. He believes that it is possible to gain much from a comparison of systems that are incommensurate, having basic disagreements. The fact of differences need not bring closure to productive debate, rather he states, the differences can produce openness.<sup>16</sup> The horizon of the discourse need not be so strictly bounded or limited. Humanistic Buddhism along with other systems and developments within Buddhism have the potential of contributing new ideas and structures to our thought. That contribution should not be destroyed by either turning away from the debate or failing to see the depth and strength of the Buddhism position.

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<sup>1</sup> James Whitehill, “Buddhist Ethics in Western Context: The Virtues Approach” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Vol. 1, 1994

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> The position of Ambedkar is described in a clear fashion in Christopher Queen and Sallie King's *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996) p 62 ff. See

<sup>4</sup> Ian Harris, "Causation and *Teleos*: The Problem of Buddhist Environmental Ethics" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* Vol 1, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. For a somewhat different view see "Early Buddhist Tradition and Ecological Ethics" by Lambert Schmithausen in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol 4, 1997 and the article "Nature, Nature, and No Self: Bioengineering and Buddhist Values" by Michael Barnhart in *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* vol 7, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> See Damian Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (New York: St Martins Press, 1992). His bioethical position is perhaps best expressed in "Killing, Karma, and Caring: Euthanasia in Buddhism and Christianity" *Journal of Medical Ethics* 21:5, October 1995. Pp. 265-269. See Michael Barnhart's review of his volume *Buddhist and Bioethics* in *Philosophy East and West* 47:4 October, 1997. Pp 611-616.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Margolis, *Pragmatism Without Foundations* (Oxford:Blackwell, 1986) pp 235 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) p 17.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p 17.

<sup>10</sup> An early discussion of the possibility of Buddhism as an ethic of virtue can be found in Joanna Macy "Dependent Co-arising: The Destructiveness of Buddhist Ethics" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7:1 Spring, 1979. Pp 38-52. Further discussion can be found in Peter Harvey's work *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values, and Issues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). He makes reference to such passages as *Majjhimanikaya* II 114-116 which defines wholesome and unwholesome conduct. Harvey defines his position in detail in "Criteria for Judging the Unwholesomeness of Actions in the Texts of Theravada Buddhism" *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, vol 2, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> J.B. Bailey in his article under "Ethics" in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* edited by James Hastings (New York: Schribner's Sons, 1928).

<sup>12</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh has returned to this topic in many of his works such as *Cultivating the Mind of Love: The Practice of Looking Deeply in the Mahayana Buddhist Tradition* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1996), or *Love in Action: Writings on Nonviolent Social Change* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Ken Jones, *The Social Face of Buddhism: An Approach to Political and Social Activism* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Hsing Yun, *Perfectly Willing*. (Hacienda Heights: Hsi Lai University Press, 1994) p 3.

<sup>15</sup> David Kalupahana *Ethics in Early Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995) p 80. See the review by Damien Keown in *Journal of Religion* 77:2 April, 1997, pp 337-340.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985). A good discussion is found in Michael Barnhart, "Sunyata, Textualism, and Incommensurability" *Philosophy East and West* 44:4, October, 1994. Pp. 647-658.

The *Sutra of Bequeathed Teachings* says, "The moon may become hot and the sun may grow cold, but the Four Noble Truths will never change."

The Four Noble Truths stand at the core of all life. They explain all states of consciousness in the universe and they teach us how to achieve liberation from all forms of delusion.

Understanding the Four Noble Truths depends on wisdom. The first truth says that life is full of suffering. The second truth says that suffering is caused by our attachments to delusion. The third truth says that enlightenment or complete liberation from all suffering is possible. The fourth truth tells us how to become enlightened.

The first two of the Four Noble Truths have a cause and effect relationship to each other. The First Noble Truth is the effect and the second is its cause. The second two of the Four Noble Truths also have a cause and effect relationship to each other. The Third Noble Truth is an effect that is caused by the Fourth Noble Truth.

At first glance, you might wonder why the Buddha placed the Four Noble Truths in the order he did. Doesn't it seem more logical to place the second and fourth truths, which are both causes, before the first and the third truths, which are both effects? Though the Four Noble Truths would still be understandable if they were placed in this order, the Buddha chose to use a different order because he wanted to teach them in the most effective way possible. Since it is easier for most people to grasp an effect and then come to understand its cause, the Buddha placed the truth of suffering first. Then he explained the cause of suffering. Once people understand the first two Noble Truths, they naturally want to liberate themselves from them. To help us understand how to achieve this liberation, the Buddha taught the Third Noble Truth, which is the cessation of suffering. Then he taught the Fourth Noble Truth, which is the way that leads to the cessation of suffering.

First the Buddha described the problem, then he explained the cause. Then told of the solution and only lastly did he tell us how to achieve that solution.

—*Lotus In A Stream, by Hsing Yun, pp.29-30*