



# **An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics**

**Peter Harvey**



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press, 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without  
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000  
Fourth printing 2004

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12½ pt. System QuarkXPress™ [SE]

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data*

Harvey, Peter (Brian Peter)  
An introduction to Buddhist ethics: foundations, values and  
issues / Peter Harvey.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 55394 6 (hb)

I. Buddhist ethics. I. Title.

BJ1289.H37 2000

294.3'5-dc21 99-27718 CIP

ISBN 0 521 55394 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 55640 6 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Not to do any evil,  
to cultivate what is wholesome,  
to purify one's mind:  
this is the teaching of the Buddhas

*(Dhammapada, verse 183)*

**Hi all, I've crossed out some sections you can skip over in these few pages. BD**

## *Introduction*

Buddhist ethics as a field of academic study in the West is not new, but in recent years has experienced a considerable expansion, as seen, for example, in the very successful Internet *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. The schools of Buddhism have rich traditions of thought on ethics, though this is often scattered through a variety of works which also deal with other topics. This book aims to be an integrative over-view of ethics in the different Buddhist traditions, showing the strong continuities as well as divergencies between them. It seeks to do this in a way that addresses issues which are currently of concern in Western thought on ethics and society, so as to clarify the Buddhist perspective(s) on these and make Buddhist ethics more easily available to Western thinkers on these issues. In exploring Buddhist ethics, this work aims to look at what the scriptures and key thinkers have said as well as at how things work out in practice among Buddhists, whose adherence may be at various levels, and who naturally operate in a world in which their religion is only one of the factors that affect their behaviour. Even when Buddhists fall short of their ethical ideals, the way that they tend to do so itself tells one something about the way the religion functions as a living system.

~~Chapters 1–3 prepare the way for looking at ethical issues by exploring the framework of Buddhist ethics in terms of the foundations of ethics in Buddhism's world-view(s), and the key values which arise from this. While the ethical guidelines of different religions and philosophies have much in common, each is based on a certain view of the world and of human beings' place in it. Such a world-view gives particular emphases to the related ethical system, gives it a particular kind of rationale, and provides particular forms of motivation for acting in accord with it. A religion is more than beliefs and ethics, though, so its ethics also need to be understood in the context of its full range of practices.~~



The term 'ethics' is used in this work to cover:

- (1) thought on the bases and justification of moral guidelines (normative ethics), and on the meaning of moral terms (meta-ethics);
- (2) specific moral guidelines (applied ethics);
- (3) how people actually behave (descriptive ethics).

David Little and Sumner Twiss, in their work on comparative religious ethics, have defined a 'moral' statement as one which addresses problems of co-operation among humans. It gives an 'action-guide' for individuals and groups so as to initiate, preserve or extend some form of co-operation, by guiding actions, character, emotions, attitudes etc. that impinge on this. Morality is 'other-regarding': focused on the effect of our actions etc. on others (1978: 28–9). While this is a reasonable view, it is an incomplete one for Buddhist morality, as this is also concerned with the quality of our interactions with non-human sentient beings too.

Moral 'action-guides' demand attention, though they sometimes conflict with each other – should one protect someone by lying to someone else? – and may conflict with religious action-guides, such as in the story of Abraham and the burning bush, where he is prepared to kill his son through faith in God. Actions done for purely prudential reasons – I do not want to go to jail, or to hell – are not really done from *ethical* considerations, though they may help form behavioural traits that are supportive of moral development. Religions sometimes use prudential considerations, for example karmic results, to help *motivate* actions benefiting others, without *justifying/validating* such actions on prudential, non-moral grounds. Broadly, religious-based ethical systems support ethics by motivating and justifying positive other-regarding actions and discouraging actions harmful to others, and strengthening the character-traits which foster moral action.

Little and Twiss regard a 'religious' statement as one that expresses acceptance of a set of beliefs, attitudes and practices based on a notion of a sacred source of values and guidance, that functions to resolve the 'ontological problems of interpretability' (1978: 56). That is, religion is focused on making sense of life, including suffering, death and evil, so as to help people understand, and resolve, the human predicament. Morality and ethics can exist apart from religion, for example in humanism or utilitarianism, or ethics can be integrated into a religious system. The same prescription, for example 'do not kill', may be justified by a purely ethical reason, for example this has a bad effect on the welfare of others, or a purely religious one, for example it is forbidden by God, or a mixture, for example it is forbidden by God because it harms others.

## start again here

In a Buddhist context, the effect of actions on the welfare of others is itself a key consideration, as is the effect of an action on spiritual progress, and what the Buddha is seen as having said on it. Religions often move imperceptibly from ethical concerns, relating to material welfare of others, to more 'spiritual' ones such as self-discipline and renunciation, though these may, in turn, have ethical spin-offs.

The history of Buddhism spans almost 2,500 years from its origin in India with Siddhattha Gotama (Pali; Siddhārtha Gautama in Sanskrit; c. 480–400 BCE), through its spread to most parts of Asia and, in the twentieth century, to the West. While its fortunes have waxed and waned over the ages, over half of the present world population live in areas where Buddhism is, or has been, a dominant cultural force.

The English term 'Buddhism' correctly indicates that the religion is characterized by a devotion to 'the Buddha', 'Buddhas' or 'Buddhahood'. 'Buddha' is not, in fact, a proper name, but a descriptive title meaning 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One'. This implies that most people are seen, in a spiritual sense, as being asleep – unaware of how things really are. In addition to 'the Buddha' – i.e. the historical Buddha, Gotama, from its earliest times the Buddhist tradition has postulated other Buddhas who have lived on earth in distant past ages, or who will do so in the future. The Mahāyāna tradition also postulated the existence of many Buddhas currently existing in other parts of the universe. All such Buddhas, known as *sammā-sambuddhas* (Pali; Skt *samyak-sambuddhas*), or 'perfect fully Awakened Ones', are nevertheless seen as occurring only rarely within the vast and ancient cosmos. More common are those who are 'buddhas' in a lesser sense, who have awakened to the truth by practising in accordance with the guidance of a perfect Buddha such as Gotama.

In its long history, Buddhism has used a variety of teachings and means to help people first develop a calmer, more integrated and compassionate personality, and then 'wake up' from restricting delusions: delusions which cause attachment and thus suffering for an individual and those he or she interacts with. The guide for this process of transformation has been the *Dhamma* (Pali; Skt *Dharma*). This means the eternal truths and cosmic law-orderliness discovered by the Buddha(s), Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist path of practice, and the goal of Buddhism, the timeless *Nirvāṇa* (Skt; Pali *Nibbāna*). Buddhism thus essentially consists of understanding, practising and realizing *Dhamma*.

The most important bearers of the Buddhist tradition have been the monks and nuns who make up the Buddhist *Saṅgha* (Pali; Skt *Samgha*):

'Community' or 'Order'. From approximately a hundred years after the death of Gotama, certain differences arose in the *Saṅgha*, which gradually led to the development of a number of monastic fraternities, each following a slightly different monastic code (*Vinaya*), and to different schools of thought. All branches of the *Saṅgha* trace their ordination-line back to one or other of the early fraternities; but of the early schools of thought, only that which became known as the *Theravāda* has continued to this day. Its name indicates that it purports to follow the 'teaching' which is 'ancient' or 'primordial' (*thera*): that is, the Buddha's teaching. While it has not remained static, it has kept close to what we know of the early teachings of Buddhism, and preserved their emphasis on attaining liberation by one's own efforts, using the *Dhamma* as guide.

Around the beginning of the Christian era, a movement began which led to a new style of Buddhism known as the *Mahāyāna*, or 'Great Vehicle'. This has been more overtly innovative, so that for many centuries, Indian *Mahāyānists* continued to compose new scriptures. The *Mahāyāna* is characterized, on the one hand, by devotion to a number of holy saviour beings, and on the other by several sophisticated philosophies, developed by extending the implications of the earlier teachings. The saviour beings are both heavenly Buddhas and heavenly *Bodhisattvas* (Skt; Pali *Bodhisatta*), 'beings for enlightenment' who are near the end of the long *Bodhisattva* path – much elaborated and emphasized by the *Mahāyāna* – that leads to Buddhahood. In the course of time, in India and beyond, the *Mahāyāna* produced many schools of its own, such as Zen.

Our knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha is based on several canons of scripture, which derive from the early *Saṅgha's* oral transmission of bodies of teachings agreed on at several councils. These canons gradually diverged as different floating oral traditions were drawn on, and systematizing texts peculiar to each school were added. The *Theravādin* 'Pali Canon', preserved in the Pali language, is the most complete extant early canon, and contains some of the earliest material. Most of its teachings are in fact the common property of all Buddhist schools, being simply the teachings which the *Theravādins* preserved from the early common stock. The *Mahāyāna*, though, added much to this stock. While parts of the Pali Canon clearly originated after the time of the Buddha, much must derive from his teachings. There is an overall harmony to the Canon, suggesting 'authorship' of its system of thought by one mind.

The early canons contain a section on *Vinaya*, or monastic discipline, and one on *Suttas* (Pali; Skt *Sūtras*), or 'discourses' of the Buddha, and some contain one on *Abhidhamma* (Pali; Skt *Abhidharma*), or 'further teachings', which systematizes the *Sutta*-teachings in the form of detailed analyses of human experience. The main teachings of Buddhism are contained in the *Suttas*, which in the Pali Canon are divided into five *Nikāyas* or 'Collections', the first four (D., M., S., A.; sixteen volumes) generally being the older. The Pali Canon was one of the earliest to be written down, in Sri Lanka in around 80 BCE, after which little, if any, new material was added to it. The extensive non-canonical Pali literature includes additional *Abhidhamma* works, historical chronicles, and many volumes of commentaries. An extremely clear introduction to many points of Buddhist doctrine is the *Milindapañha* (*Miln.*), a first-century CE text which purports to record conversations between a Buddhist monk and Milinda (Menander; c. 155–130 BCE), a king of Greek ancestry.

*Mahāyāna* texts were composed from around the first century BCE, originating as written works in a hybrid form of the Indian prestige language, Sanskrit, rather than as oral compositions. While many are *Sūtras* attributed to the Buddha, their form and content clearly show that they were later restatements and extensions of the Buddha's message. The main sources for our understanding of *Mahāyāna* teachings are the very extensive Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist Canons. While most of the Pali Canon has been translated into English, only selected texts from these have been translated into Western languages, though much progress is being made.

Of the above sources, *Vinaya* (*Vin.*) texts often include material relevant to ethics, both in the form of specific rules for monks and nuns and in the reasons given for these and mitigating factors for offences against them. Ethical material is scattered throughout the *Theravāda Suttas* and *Mahāyāna Sūtras*, with some particularly focusing on ethical matters. The *Abhidhamma* literature contains material on the psychology of ethics, and the commentaries of all traditions contain useful explanations of moral points in the scriptures as well as stories with a moral message. One sees this particularly in the commentary to the *Jātakas*, which expands on canonical verses about past lives of the Buddha to develop morality tales.

All traditions also have treatises by named authors which include ethical material. Of these, the following are particularly of note. In the *Theravāda* tradition, Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE) wrote the



*Visuddhimagga* (*Vism.*), whose ninth chapter contains some excellent material on lovingkindness and compassion. He also compiled many commentaries, which are often treatises in their own right. In the Sarvāstivāda tradition, an early school which has died out, is the compendious *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣyam* (*AKB.*) of Vasubandhu (fourth century CE), which influenced the Mahāyāna tradition. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the poet Śāntideva (seventh century CE) produced both the *Bodhi-caryā-āṭāra* (*Bca.*), an outline of the *Bodhisattva*-path with some inspiring material on compassion and patience, and the *Sikṣā-samuccaya* (*Ss.*), a compendium of quotations from Mahāyāna *Sūtras*, often on ethical themes. Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250 CE) wrote the *Rāja-parikathā-ratnamālā* (*RPR.*) as advice to a king on how to rule compassionately, and Aśaṅga (fourth or fifth century CE), in his *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, gives material on the ethics of the *Bodhisattva* (Tatz, 1986). Of course, contemporary Buddhists in Asia are also involved in ethical thought, action and innovation, as will be seen in the course of this book, and Buddhists in the West, whose numbers have grown steadily since the 1960s, are also participating in this process.

In reading Buddhist texts, stylistic features peculiar to them become apparent. The *Suttas* contain chunks of material which are repeated several times in a story or analysis, as they originated as oral literature which found this mode of composition congenial. They also contain many numbered lists, such as the Four Noble Truths, the five hindrances, and the seven factors of awakening. These aided the memorizing of oral material as well as reflecting what seems to have been the Buddha's very analytical turn of mind, breaking things down into their components. While he sometimes explicitly showed how these factors then related to each other and to the purpose for which the list was made, this is sometimes only implicit, and has to be teased out.

While Buddhism is now only a minority religion within the borders of modern India, its spread beyond India means that it is currently found in three main cultural areas. These are those of: 'Southern Buddhism', where the Theravāda school is found, along with some elements incorporated from the Mahāyāna; 'Eastern Buddhism', where the Chinese transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism is found, and the area of Tibetan culture, 'Northern Buddhism', which is the heir of late Indian Buddhism where the tantric or Mantrayāna version of the Mahāyāna is the dominant form. In recent years, it has become possible to start talking about 'Western' Buddhism, too, but this as yet has no overall cultural cohesion, as it is drawing on all the Asian Buddhist traditions, as well as innovating in certain ways.

The main countries of Southern Buddhism are Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, along with Cambodia and Laos, where religion has suffered because of wars and Communism in recent decades. Northern Buddhism is found mainly in Tibet, now absorbed into the People's Republic of China, among Tibetan and Mongol people in the rest of north-west China, in Mongolia – recently free of Communism – in the small kingdom of Bhutan, alongside Hinduism in Nepal, and among Tibetan exiles living in India. Eastern Buddhism is mainly found in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Singapore, as well as in Communist China, Vietnam and North Korea. The world's Buddhist population (excluding Western and Asian Buddhists in the West) is roughly 495 million: 105 million Buddhists of the Southern tradition, 25 million of the Northern tradition, and perhaps 365 of the Eastern tradition, though it is difficult to give a figure for the number of 'Buddhists' of this tradition, particularly China, on account of traditional multi-religion allegiance and the current dominance of Communism in the People's Republic of China.

Buddhism's concentration on the essentials of spiritual development has meant that it has been able to co-exist with both other major religions and popular folk traditions which catered for people's desire for a variety of rituals. There has hardly ever been a 'wholly' Buddhist society, if this means a kind of religious one-party state. In the lands of Eastern Buddhism, Buddhism has co-existed with Confucianism, a semi-religious system of social philosophy which has had a strong influence on people's ethics in this area. Buddhism has been very good at adapting to different cultures while guarding its own somewhat fluid borders by a critical tolerance of other traditions. Its style has been to offer invitations to a number of levels of spiritual practice for those who have been ready to commit themselves.