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ESOTERIC BUDDHISM. *See* **Mijiao (Esoteric) School; Tantra; Vajrayāna**

ETHICS

Buddhist canonical texts have no term that directly translates into the English word *ethics*; the closest term is *śīla* (moral discipline). *Śīla* is one of the threefold disciplines, along with PRAJÑĀ (WISDOM) and mental cultivation (samādhi), which constitute the path leading to the end of suffering. *Śīla* is most closely identified with the widely known five moral PRECEPTS (*pañcaśīla*) of lay Buddhists: not to kill, not to steal, not to lie, not to have inappropriate sex, and not to use intoxicants. The Buddhist tradition has a notion of voluntary and gradualist moral expectations: Lay Buddhists may choose to take the five (in some Buddhist areas fewer) precepts or to take temporarily eight or ten precepts; novices take ten precepts and ordained monks and nuns take over two hundred precepts.

Sources of ethical thinking

In all areas of Buddhism, followers look to the "three treasures" for guidance: the Buddha as teacher, the dharma as the teaching, and the SAṄGHA as the community that transmits the dharma. With these three treasures, Buddhists have rich resources on ethical thinking, especially in the written materials communicating the dharma. The three major divisions of the Buddhist scriptural CANON all contain ethical materials. The sūtras contain moral teachings and ethical reflection; the VINAYA gives moral and behavioral rules for ordained Buddhists, and the ABHIDHARMA literature explores the psychology of morality. In addition to canonical literature, numerous commentaries and treatises of Buddhist schools contain ethical reflections.

The ethical teachings of scripture can be confirmed by one's own reflection. The sūtra's story of the Kālamas is often cited to show the Buddha's emphasis on personal reflection. In this tale the Buddha tells the Kālamas that they should not blindly accept teachings based on tradition, instruction from a respected teacher, or from any other sources without confirming these teachings through their own experience. He helps them see for themselves that actions motivated by greed, hatred, or delusion are unethical, and those motivated by the opposite of greed, hatred, or delusion are ethical.

Ethics as part of the path, and the relationship of ethics to suffering, emptiness, karma, and rebirth

Ethics is a major part of the Buddhist PATH that leads to the end of suffering. The path is sometimes conceived of as a threefold training in which *śīla* provides the foundation for samādhi and prajñā. In the noble eightfold path, *śīla* includes the practices of right action, right speech, and right livelihood. The practice of moral discipline is supportive of the other practices in the path.

THERAVĀDA texts make a distinction between the ordinary path that leads to better REBIRTH and the noble path that leads to NIRVĀṆA. On the ordinary path a person is partly motivated by what is gained through ethical action. On the noble path a person is gradually freed from the false idea of the self and from selfish motivations. An ARHAT who has completed the ordinary path is on the noble path; he or she is beyond ethics and KARMA (ACTION) in the sense that the arhat spontaneously acts morally, and his or her actions no longer have good or bad karmic fruits. The arhat always acts morally without being attached to morality. Many Buddhist scholars (Harvey, Keown, and others) reject the conclusion of anthropological studies in Myanmar (Burma) that there were two

separate distinct paths—an ordinary path leading to better rebirths for laypeople and a noble path leading to nirvaṇā for monks (Spiro, King). Instead, they argue that both lay and ordained Buddhists practice the ordinary path with the understanding that the noble path is the eventual long-term goal.

The Buddhist understanding of the nature of reality underscores the importance of ethics. The view that suffering is the nature of lives lived in ignorance emphasizes the need to alleviate suffering in others, as well as in oneself. The view of no-self (anātman) undercuts any clinging to individualistic gain: Since the idea of a separately existing self is false, then one must give up selfishly motivated actions. In MAHĀYĀNA Buddhism the understanding of ŚŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS) reinforces the idea that there are no independent, separately existing factors of existence. The realization of no-self, emptiness, and interdependence leads to an ethics of consideration for all beings and all things.

According to the Buddhist understanding of the natural law of karma, wholesome actions result in pleasant karmic results and unwholesome actions lead to unpleasant karmic results. But it is not true that an action is good simply because it has pleasant results. Instead, it has pleasant results because the action itself is good. The degree of goodness of an action is dependent on the motive for the action. There is a hierarchy of motives for good actions. As the Chinese monk-scholar YINSHUN (b. 1906) explains it, "Lower people give for the sake of themselves. / Middle people give for their own liberation. / Those who give all for the benefit of others / Are called great people" (p. 228). The karmic result of an action depends not just on the action, but especially on the motive behind the action and on the manner in which it is performed.

The belief in karma and rebirth is important in initially motivating good behavior, in emphasizing its importance, in giving people more empathy for others to whom they were related in previous lives, and in supplying a longer-term perspective for seeing one's ethical development over lifetimes. The rarity of human rebirth makes each human life especially precious as an opportunity for moral and spiritual development.

Ordained and lay Buddhist ethics

For ordained monks and nuns, behavior is guided by the canonical texts in the vinaya. The vinaya contains rules, consequences for violating the rules, and explanations of the origin and interpretation of the rules. Some of the rules are what we would consider ethical guidelines; others are aimed at the smooth operation of the saṅgha and at maintaining the saṅgha's good reputation with lay Buddhists.

For lay Buddhists the foundation for leading a moral life is twofold: the restraints on behavior called for in the five permanent (or eight or ten temporary) precepts, and the encouragement to selfless giving called for in the primary moral virtue of DĀNA (GIVING). Giving is the first Buddhist PĀRAMITĀ (PERFECTION) and by far the most emphasized for lay Buddhists. Other perfections are *śīla* (moral virtue), *kṣānti* (patience), *vīrya* (vigor), DHYĀNA (TRANCE STATE), and prajñā (wisdom). These perfections are discussed in philosophical texts and are embodied by the Bodhisattva in JĀTAKA tales, such as the one about VIŚVANTARA (Pāli, Vessantara), the prince who perfects *dāna* to the point of giving away even his wife and children. Buddhists understand that the precepts and the perfections can be followed at different spiritual levels: Giving done with thought for karmic results is not as good as giving that is performed because it is valued in itself. Giving done selflessly further lessens the false concept of self and thus moves the giver closer to wisdom.

Buddhist texts devote more attention to behavioral norms for ordained members of the saṅgha, but social and political ethics for the rest of society are not ignored. One of the best visions for social relationships is found in the *Sigālovāda-sutta* (*Advice to Sigāla*), in which the Buddha explains the value of mutually supportive and respectful relationships between parents and children, students and teachers, husbands and wives, friends and associates, employers and employees, and householders and renunciants. This particular text lays out the foundations for a harmonious lay community just as the vinaya texts do for a harmonious monastic community.

Buddhist texts that depict conversations between the Buddha and kings often impart political values, such as the Ten Duties of a King, in which the Buddha describes a benevolent monarch whose power is limited by the higher power of the dharma. In South and Southeast Asia, Buddhist ideas of benevolent KINGSHIP had great influence, especially as King AŚOKA became the legendary ideal of Buddhist rulers. In East Asia, Buddhist ideas were usually superseded by Confucian political and social ideals.

Mahāyāna emphases

Mahāyāna Buddhism adds to Buddhist ethics a greater emphasis on the BODHISATTVA as the model for ethical behavior. Bodhisattvas embody the virtues, espe-

cially compassion and wisdom, to which all Buddhists should eventually aspire. The bodhisattva masters the perfections through a process of ten stages with the goal of gaining enlightenment for the benefit of all living beings. Bodhisattva vows take several forms, including the vow made by the eighth-century Buddhist saint ŚĀNTIDEVA: "For as long as space endures / And for as long as living beings remain, / Until then may I too abide / To dispel the misery of the world." In East Asian Mahāyāna, an ideal lay Buddhist is the bodhisattva VIMALAKĪRTI, whose wisdom and compassion is shown to outshine even that of monks.

In Theravāda Buddhism there is a strong emphasis on the vinaya, which governs the behavior of the ordained community. In Mahāyāna Buddhism outside India the unifying power of the vinaya has been less significant. East Asians often collapsed vinaya and *śīla* into a single concept (Chinese, *jielü*), thus diluting the distinctiveness of vinaya. In addition, many of the rules seemed irrelevant to a non-Indian cultural environment. In East Asia, the vinaya had to accommodate a very different culture and the already dominant social ethics of Confucianism.

In East Asia some Buddhist schools accepted the teachings of Buddhist morality but believed that it was impossible to follow the precepts correctly in the present age of the DECLINE OF THE DHARMA. The Nichiren and PURE LAND SCHOOLS of Japan have developed this idea most clearly. In these schools the means to enlightenment comes from outside the unenlightened individual. NICHIREN identified the source of that power as the LOTUS SŪTRA (SADDHARMAPUṆḌARĪKA-SŪTRA), which encapsulated the powers of all buddhas and bodhisattvas; the Pure Land leader SHINRAN (1173–1263) identified the source as the compassionate power of AMITĀBHA (Japanese, Amida) Buddha. In these schools, morality has never been seen as a means to an end, but rather as an expression of gratitude, and as empowered by something beyond the individual.

The Chinese CHAN SCHOOL of Buddhism and Tibetan TANTRA sometimes seem to use language that borders on antinomianism. By transcending the dualities of all things, including right and wrong and good and evil, there is the possibility of enlightenment. In fact, the problem is not with the duality of moral precepts, but with the self-centered clinging to moral precepts and the tendency toward self-righteousness.

Comparisons with Western ethics

Western anthropologists studying Theravāda Buddhism in Burma have argued for differing views of morality in monks and laypeople. Melford Spiro identified two forms of Buddhism: *kammatic Buddhism* of laypeople who followed morality in order to gain a better rebirth, and *nibbānic Buddhism* of the monks who followed the path to gain nibbāna (Sanskrit, nirvāṇa). In both cases, the moral precepts are viewed as means to a goal, but to different goals. This understanding of Buddhist ethics places it closest to a Western utilitarian ethics where the goal is the reduction of suffering, and ethics is the means to that goal. In the decades after this anthropological work, other Buddhist scholars have argued from the anthropological data and from textual sources that a utilitarian view of ethics is not appropriate to Buddhism. Damien Keown and others have argued that the best way to understand Buddhist ethics is in terms of Aristotelian virtue ethics. The moral precepts are not to be followed just because they reduce suffering (although they do), but because they are good in themselves. That is, *śīla* is not just a means for gaining wisdom and concentration; *śīla* and wisdom are both part of the final goal of enlightenment and are interdependent. In *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (1992) Keown argued that Buddhist ethics are teleological ethics similar to Aristotelian ethics because "the virtues are the means to the gradual realization of the end through the incarnation of the end in the present" (p. 194). In Buddhism, of course, this gradual realization takes place over many lifetimes.

Peter Harvey summed up the field of Buddhist ethics in comparison to Western ethics by acknowledging that "the rich field of Buddhist ethics would be narrowed by wholly collapsing it into any single one of the Kantian, Aristotelian or Utilitarian models, though Buddhism agrees with each in respectively acknowledging the importance of (1) a good motivating will, (2) cultivation of character, and (3) the reduction of suffering in others and oneself" (p. 51).

Contemporary ethical issues

In the contemporary world, Buddhist scholars and leaders have sought to apply Buddhist ethics to moral questions of this age. This is most clearly evident in the ENGAGED BUDDHISM and humanistic Buddhism movements. *Engaged Buddhism* is THICH NHAT HANH's term for bringing Buddhism out of the monastery to deal with pressing social issues. The ideals of engaged Buddhism have been embraced by a wide range of Asian and Western Buddhist leaders and movements. In Chinese Buddhism, humanistic Buddhism (*rensheng fojiao*) was developed by the reformer TAIXU (1890–1947), the scholar Yinshun, the Chan master

Shengyan, and the Taiwanese nun Zhengyan (Cheng Yen) to refer to a form of modern Buddhism involved with current social issues such as education, poverty, pollution, and sickness.

Many current ethical issues are related to the first Buddhist precept: not to harm other beings. The first precept is central to Buddhist discussions of ABORTION, WAR, euthanasia, animal rights, environmentalism, and economic justice. Buddhist writings against war and military violence are some of the best known. Nhat Hanh, the fourteenth DALAI LAMA, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Mahāghosānanda are some of the Buddhist leaders who have argued against violence as a means to resist the oppression in their countries. The Buddhist tradition has nothing quite like a "just war" tradition, only isolated instances where Buddhists have tried to justify violence by claiming their enemies were not truly human. The dominant tradition is pacifist.

Whether violence to one's own body is an acceptable means of protest is disputed. Nhat Hanh considered Vietnamese monks who performed SELF-IMMOLATION during the 1960s and 1970s to be bodhisattvas burning brightly for truth. Others, like the Dalai Lama and Shengyan, have rejected self-immolation, fasting, or other suicidal actions as political means. Early Buddhist scriptures specifically forbid suicide, but this question gets to the heart of the issue of whether bodhisattvas can violate the precepts in order to reduce the suffering of others. In this scenario a bodhisattva violates normative Buddhist ethics with the willingness to take on negative karmic effects in order to benefit other living beings. In one *jātaka* tale the bodhisattva offers his body as a meal to a hungry tigress to prevent her from eating her cubs. There is also a more controversial *jātaka* tale where the Buddha in a previous lifetime (as a bodhisattva) kills a bandit in order to save the lives of five hundred merchants that the bandit is about to kill. The understanding is that the action was motivated by compassion for both the merchants and the bandit, who would suffer terribly from the karmic fruits of these murders. The Dalai Lama, among others, has rejected such violations of Buddhist ethics on the basis that only a fully enlightened being could make such judgments.

See also: **Nichiren School**

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