Buddhism and Contemporary Society

This book is designed to accompany a course exploring the Buddhist response to a range of contemporary social issues. To facilitate its use as a course text each chapter is preceded by an overview of the contents and concludes with a summary of the key points. At the end of each chapter there are suggested questions for class discussion or use as essay titles at the tutor's discretion as well as a 'Further Reading' section. At the end of the book, the reader will find a complete bibliography and an index of proper names, terms, and concepts.

The volume begins with an introduction to Buddhist social ethics as traditionally taught, and then looks in detail at eleven individual topics of contemporary interest. The scope is broad and topics discussed include engaged Buddhism, politics, violence, economics, human rights, animals, ecology, sex and gender, abortion, euthanasia, and science and transhumanism.

The book has various aims: to equip the student to define key doctrinal concepts relevant to Buddhist social ethics; to identify the major concerns and arguments in a range of debates within Buddhist communities; to critically analyse contemporary issues from a Buddhist perspective; to articulate what is distinctive in the Buddhist position as distinct from alternative perspectives; to evaluate arguments in a balanced and scholarly manner, and equip the student to participate in discussions on a broad range of contemporary social issues drawing on evidence from both primary and secondary sources.

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Contents

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Damien Keown

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Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Asl	*Atthasālinī*
BCA	*Bodhicāryavatāra*
DA	*Dīgha Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DhpA	*Dhammapada Aṭṭhakathā*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
J	*Jātaka*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
PS	*Papañcasūdanī*
PTS	Pali Text Society
Sn	*Suttanipāta*
SN	*Saṃyutta Nikāya*
Vin	*Vinaya*
Vsm	*Visuddhimagga*

Note on Citations

A citation in the form (DN 31) refers to *sutta* number 31 of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Citations in the form DN. i.47 refer to the Pali Text Society editions of works. Thus, DN i.47 refers to to *Dīgha Nikāya* volume 1, page 47 of the Pali Text Society edition of the text. English translations of the most commonly cited Pali sources can be found in the Wisdom Publications Series from which most translations in this book are taken, sometimes with minor amendments. Pali terminology is generally used except where the Sanskrit version of a term or name is more established (e.g., karma, bodhisattva, *ātman*, Aśoka) or is otherwise more appropriate in the context.

List of Figures

Chapter One
Buddhist Social Ethics

In this chapter

The social challenges the world faces today—from environmental degradation to exploitation and economic injustice, poverty and hunger, crime, violence and war—are on a larger scale than in the Buddha's time, but the underlying causes are not so different. There are chapters in this book addressing many of these challenges, so in this first chapter we discuss Buddhist social ethics at the level of general principles. Society can be pictured as a series of concentric circles extending outwards from the individual to family, friends, teachers, workmates, neighbours, and humanity at large. The Buddha used a model of this kind in the *Sigālaka Sutta* to illustrate how society is bound together by a network of connections and reciprocal obligations. This model suggests a basis on which the social problems of the modern world might be addressed.

Introduction

Buddhism is often accused of being 'other worldly' and of having little to say on social ethics. The Buddha, it is said, preached a path of personal salvation and encouraged his followers to turn their backs on society. This view of Buddhism was promulgated by the German sociologist Max Weber who in his pioneering work *The Religion of India* first published in 1916 wrote of Buddhism: 'Salvation is an absolutely personal performance of the self-reliant individual. No one and particularly no social community can help him. The specific asocial character of genuine mysticism is here carried to its maximum' (2004, 213). Nor is Weber the only modern scholar to present this view. The distinguished French sociologist Louis Dumont characterized early members of the Buddhist Order as 'outworldly' individuals whose concern was with spiritual development rather than social reform (1985, 95).

Such opinions have encouraged the belief that Buddhism is concerned only with the higher spiritual life. The Theravāda form of Buddhism, in particular, is often portrayed as elitist and lacking in social concern. Long before Weber's time Mahāyāna sources had contrasted the supposedly selfish goal of the *arahant* with the altruism of the bodhisattva. Such stereotypes are reinforced by often unfavourable comparisons with other religions, especially Christianity. To some, Buddhism appears to lack a 'social gospel' and to be less concerned with the struggle for social justice than either Christianity or Islam (Eller 1992, 102). While many Buddhists reject such criticisms others

admit they are not entirely misconceived. As Charles Wei-hsun Fu notes: 'In contrast to Christian tradition, the Buddhist tradition continues to lag behind in regard to the modern development of social ethics . . . This, our first and foremost task, can no longer be evaded by the Buddhist community' (Wei-hsun Fu and Wawrytko 1991, 328). In recent times the task of developing a Buddhist social ethics has been taken up enthusiastically by the engaged Buddhism movement, as we will see in the next chapter.

It is undeniable that the bulk of early Buddhist literature concerns *personal* ethics and spiritual practices. Nevertheless, there are a substantial number of texts that discuss the role of the individual in society. In a collection of essays entitled *Facing the Future: four essays on Buddhism and Society*, Bhikkhu Bodhi affirms that the Pali canon contains 'clear-cut practical guidelines in devising a social ethic capable of addressing the problems peculiar to the present age' (2000, 9). Bodhi has compiled evidence in support of this claim in a volume entitled *The Buddha's Teaching on Social and Communal harmony* (2016). This work provides an excellent compilation of primary sources on Buddhist social ethics, and we will feature some passages from it below. Speaking of the Buddha, Bodhi notes, 'From his position as a renunciant who stood outside the conventional social order, he looked with deep concern on struggling humanity, enmeshed in conflict while aspiring for peace, and out of compassion he sought to bring harmony into the troubled arena of human relations' (2016, 2).

Bodhi is not the only scholar to reject the charge of unworldliness. Others have pointed out that 'the numerous sermons to laymen on the subject of their social well-being and the discourses on the nature of a righteous government and of a just society, coupled with the example of Aśoka, leave no doubt that this aspect has received serious attention in Buddhism' (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke 2006, 65). We should recall in this connection that the Buddha preached the Dhamma 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many' (*bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya*), and not exclusively for a minority who dedicated themselves to spiritual goals.

A moment's reflection on some familiar Buddhist teachings will reveal that social service was an integral component of the path to nirvana. The practice of the four Divine Abodes, namely loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*uppekhā*), would be impractical in the absence of living beings who could be their object. Various other formulations reveal the importance attached to social service. The 'Four Modes of Attraction' (*saṅgahavatthu*), for example, are commonly mentioned in Mahāyāna *sūtras* but have their origin in Pali sources. The four are liberality (*dāna*), pleasant speech (*piyavacana*), beneficial acts (*atthacariya*), and equanimity (*samānattatā*) (AN 4:32). Initially designed as a means of developing personal friendships they also serve to strengthen social relations.

Another group of commendable actions with social relevance is the Ten Meritorious Acts (*dasa puññakiriya-vatthūni*). These are listed by Buddhaghosa (Asl 157) as: 1) Liberality (*dāna*), 2) Morality (*sīla*), 3) Mental Cultivation (*bhāvanā*), 4) Showing respect (*apacāyana*), 5) Transference of merit (*pattidāna*), 6) Rendering service to those to whom it is due (*veyyavacca*), 7) Hearing the Dhamma (*dhammasavana*), 8) Preaching the Dhamma (*dhammadesanā*), 9) Listening to instructive preaching (*suti*), 10) Rectification of views (*diṭṭhijjukamma*).

The overall goal of Buddhist social ethics is to combine the highest good of the individual with the welfare of society. In the opinion of a distinguished Thai scholar-monk: 'The most basic point to be made about Buddhist social ethics is that in keeping with the Buddhist doctrine of dependent co-arising, individual betterment and perfection on the one hand and the social good on the other are fundamentally interrelated and interdependent' (Rajavaramuni 1990, 31). This opinion is supported in various texts. One source distinguishes four kinds of persons on the basis of whether they are practicing 1) for their own welfare but not the welfare of others; 2) for the welfare of others but not their own welfare; 3) for the welfare of neither; and 4) for the welfare of both. The Buddha extols the one practising for the welfare of both as 'the foremost, the best, the preeminent, the supreme, and the finest of these four persons' (Bodhi 2016, 99).

Bodhi distinguishes two types of community which he labels 'natural' and 'intentional.' The difference is explained as follows:

> Communities can be distinguished into two types, which we might call the natural and the intentional. A natural community is one that emerges spontaneously from the natural bonds between people . . . Intentional communities, in contrast, are formed deliberately. They bring people together under the banner of a shared purpose or common ideals. They usually set up qualifications for membership and are governed by rules and regulations (Bodhi 2016, 105).

Both kinds of communities existed in India long before the Buddha's day, but the Buddha founded a new 'intentional' community known as the *saṅgha* with the following objectives:

> [The Buddha] founded an intentional community devoted to fostering inner and outer peace. This task was thrust upon him almost from the start; for the Buddha was not a solitary wanderer, teaching those who came to him for guidance and then leaving them to their own devices. He was the founder of a new spiritual movement that from the outset was inevitably communal. (Bodhi 2016, 2f)

We will discuss the *saṅgha* in more detail below, but the Buddha's concern was not limited to the intentional community he founded, and he had much to say about the wider natural community within which the *saṅgha* was

embedded. Below, we first review the general principles for social harmony he commended. In the second half of the chapter we will consider their relevance for specific social groups.

Tolerance

The well-known *Kālāma Sutta* sheds light on the Buddhist approach to social issues. The Buddha once visited the township of the Kālāmas, who confessed themselves perplexed at the contradictory views professed by different teachers. The Buddha advised the Kālāmas to adopt a sceptical attitude toward ten common sources of authority they might otherwise be inclined to accept at face value. Thus, he counselled them not to be unduly swayed by revealed truth, tradition, hearsay, sacred texts, logic, reasoning, appearances, agreement with views, a person's competence, or the fact that a certain individual is their teacher.

We see that in his advice to the Kālāmas the Buddha recommends an attitude of critical tolerance with respect to the views and opinions of others. This is not to say that none of the ten sources mentioned can be relied on, simply that they must be approached in a spirit of critical enquiry. Views should be listened to respectfully but scrutinised and tested before being accepted. This suggests that freedom of expression and the right to dissent are both important. In the Buddha's day, many communities had a hall set aside for discussion and debate where anyone could propound their views or criticise those of others. The Buddha attended such halls and engaged with rival teachers and philosophers (DN i.178). He also visited the monasteries of leaders of other sects for dialogue on religious and philosophical questions.

The same spirit of religious tolerance is evident during the reign of Aśoka, where in Pillar Edict VII he states that he has appointed officials to concern themselves not only with the welfare of the Buddhist *saṅgha* but also the affairs of Brahmins, Jains, Ajīvikas, and other sects. In Rock Edict XII, furthermore, he writes:

> The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith. (Nikam and McKeon 1978, 51f)

The golden rule

An attitude of consideration towards others is also encouraged by the 'Golden Rule'. The Golden Rule is found in many religions and philosophies (Neusner 2008). In the Pali canon it is expressed most concisely in the *Udāna* in the form 'one who loves himself should not harm another.' This statement forms the last line of the following verse:

> On traversing all directions with the mind
> One finds no one anywhere dearer than oneself.
> Likewise everyone holds himself most dear,
> Hence one who loves himself should not harm another. (*Udāna* 5.1)

The rationale here has been explained as follows: 'To determine how he wants or would want to be treated, the actor looks within and considers his own self-interest. Once perceived, he can project the quality of his own self-interest onto others' (Scheible 2008, 126). In other words, just as we ourselves would not wish to be harmed, neither should we harm others. The point is made at slightly greater length in the *Dhammapada*, which also mentions the reward for right behaviour and punishment for those who fail to apply the Golden Rule:

> All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill. All tremble at violence; life is dear to all. Putting oneself in the place of another, one should not kill nor cause another to kill. One who, while himself seeking happiness, oppresses with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will not attain happiness hereafter. One who, while himself seeking happiness, does not oppress with violence other beings who also desire happiness, will find happiness hereafter. (Dhp 129-132, trans Buddharakkhita)

It bears pointing out that the formulation of the Golden Rule quoted above is negative and the motivation to follow the rule is not compassion. As Scheible observes:

> In Theravāda Buddhism, the Golden Rule is not equivalent to the precept to 'love your neighbor as yourself,' but rather 'do no harm to your neighbor as you would do no harm to yourself.' Love and nonharm are separate paths of action, while they may stem from the same wellspring. (2008, 126)

Explaining further, Charles Hallisey observes that in Buddhism the rule is addressed to people who are naturally inclined to put their own interests first. 'In other words,' he writes, 'the verse is offered as a kind of "imaginative role reversal" . . . to aid adherence to a precept by those whose dispositions direct them differently. The Golden Rule is not an aid to decision-making, but is a device used in moral formation' (2008, 140). This means that in the negative formulation found in Buddhism the Golden Rule is a not a call to exercise compassion so much as a device that encourages us to stop and think before acting in ways that might adversely affect others.

Positive formulations of the Golden Rule are also found, as at *Visuddhimagga* 297, where we read: 'I am happy. Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, as I want to live and not to die, so do other beings, too.' Regardless of the motivation, however, the beneficial effect on social solidarity is similar in both the negative and positive formulations of the rule. As Hallisey comments,

the various formulations of the Golden Rule in Buddhist sources function as 'tools that could help build community and fellow-feeling in the face of all-too-common human traits that threaten kinship and community' (2008, 136).

In the Mahāyāna, Śāntideva recommends that those who wish to become bodhisattvas should reflect on the equality between self and others that is the foundation of Golden Rule. In the verses below from the *Bodhicāryavatāra*, Śāntideva refers to both the positive and negative operation of the rule, citing the desire to avoid suffering and the wish to attain happiness:

> 90. At first one should meditate intently on the equality of oneself and others as follows: 'All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself.'
>
> 91. Just as the body, with its many parts from division into hands and other limbs, should be protected as a single entity, so too should this entire world which is divided, but undivided in its nature to suffer and be happy.
>
> 92. Even though suffering in me does not cause distress in the bodies of others, I should nevertheless find their suffering intolerable because of the affection I have for myself,
>
> 93. In the same way that, though I cannot experience another's suffering in myself, his suffering is hard for him to bear because of his affection for himself.
>
> 94. I should dispel the suffering of others because it is suffering like my own suffering. I should help others too because of their nature as beings, which is like my own being.
>
> 95. When happiness is liked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I strive after happiness only for myself?
>
> 96. When fear and suffering are disliked by me and others equally, what is so special about me that I protect myself and not the other? (*Bodhicāryavatāra* Chapter VIII, trans Crosby and Skilton).

Here, Śāntideva reflects on the universality of suffering and the common desire for happiness and formulates his version of the Golden Rule accordingly as 'All equally experience suffering and happiness. I should look after them as I do myself' (v.90). Śāntideva also recommends an associated practice for advanced bodhisattvas which he calls 'the supreme mystery: exchange of self and other' (BCA VIII.120). This goes beyond the practice of simple imaginative role reversal seen in the Golden Rule and involves a more active commitment to relieving the suffering of others regardless of personal considerations.

Discrimination

A common cause of disputes in society is discrimination against minorities. Discrimination on grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and many other factors constitute fault lines within a society that can be an obstacle to harmony and social unity. Racial tensions between black and white continue

to be a source of social unrest in countries like the United States and have led to the formation of protest movements like 'Black Lives Matter.' In Buddhist countries, discrimination has taken the form of attacks on minority ethnic and religious groups such as the Rohingya in Myanmar and Muslims in Sri Lanka. Such discrimination is far from a modern phenomenon. Racism was evident in Vedic times on the part of the Aryan arrivals in India who spoke in disrespectful terms of the indigenous residents, describing them as dark-skinned and 'noseless'. The Aryans claimed superiority by virtue of their lighter skin colour.

Needless to say, such racial differences were not the reason the Buddha described his teachings (like the four noble truths and the eightfold path) as 'aryan' (*ariya*). Nevertheless, while *ariya* has no racist associations in the Pali canon, some scholars believe that in modern times the association of Buddhism with 'whiteness' may have influenced the reception of Buddhism in the West and the subsequent development of Buddhist studies (McNicholl 2018; Anningson 2021). The Buddha, however, uses the term *ariya* in a moral or spiritual sense to mean something like 'noble.' As Malasekera and Jayatilleke note, 'The racist tenor of the former theory is thus denounced in the Buddha's classification, where the merits of people are to be judged not in terms of what they are born with but what they do with themselves' (2006, 16f).

The Buddha taught that apparent divisions among mankind are not rooted in biology but are mere conceptual designations (*samaññā*) (Sn 611). He pointed out that human beings are not divided into different species as in the animal world. In the *Sutta Nipāta* we read, 'Although in other species the distinguishing mark[s] arising from their species are numerous, among men the distinguishing mark[s] arising from their species are not similarly numerous' (Sn 607). He points out that the caste system is not a universal feature of human societies, noting that some societies are divided into two castes rather than four, and that the occupants of the two classes can change place such that 'the masters sometimes become slaves, and the slaves, masters' (MN ii.137).

The Buddha often criticised the arrogance of Brahmins and their sense of entitlement. He said that social status was the result of karma and was to be gained by virtuous conduct rather than by birth. 'Not by birth does one become an outcaste, not by birth does one become a brahmin. By (one's) action one becomes an outcaste, by (one's) action one becomes a brahmin' (Sn 136). The defining features of a Brahmin, he believed, were moral rather than due to birth or social status. In various discourses, he attacks the view that Brahmins are innately superior to those of other castes. In the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, for example, he deflates the pretensions of Ambaṭṭha, a haughty Brahmin youth, by pointing out that the purity of the youth's ancestry was a myth because one of his ancestors was in fact a slave girl to the Sakyas, the Buddha's own clan, which belonged to the *khattiya* caste (DN i.92).

Brahmins meanwhile clung to the notion of the innate superiority of their caste. They claimed certain hereditary characteristics, such as that Brahmins were handsome (*abhirūpo*), fair (*dassanīyo*), endowed with an excellent complexion (*paramāya vaṇṇapokkharatāya samannāgato*), and of the fairest colour (*brahmavaṇṇī*) (DN i.119). Buddhists often satirize such claims to superiority. It is said, for instance, in an allusion to the sacred fire tended by Brahmins, that people of all castes are capable of kindling a fire, and that the fire kindled by a brahmin burns no brighter than a fire kindled by a low caste person. And in an allusion to the ritual purity claimed by the Brahmin caste, it was pointed out that people of all castes are capable of bathing and washing themselves in the river and that Brahmins emerge no cleaner than anyone else (MN ii.151f).

In a rejection of the claim that only Brahmins could attain salvation, we find the Buddha's statement that the 'recluse Gotama proclaims the possibility of salvation to all men of all four castes' (*samaṇo Gotamo cātuvaṇṇiṃ suddhiṃ paññāpeti*) (MN ii.147). Those who deny this common humanity are said to be 'bound by racial prejudices' (*jātivāda-vinibaddha*) or 'bound by caste prejudices' (*gottavāda-vinibaddha*) and to have strayed 'far from the way of salvation' (*ārakā te anuttarāya vijjācaraṇa-sampadāya*) (DN i.99).

We can see that the Buddha practised what he preached from the fact that racial or other differences played no role in admission to the Order. People of all castes were freely admitted, and many of the most distinguished disciples came from the lower castes. Upāli, an expert on the rules of the *Vinaya*, had formerly been a barber, one of the lowest castes. The Order included members who had previously been slaves, and from families of fishermen, cowherds, deerstalkers, and blacksmiths (Rhys Davids 1899, 2:102). The Buddha made his position clear in the following statement:

> Just as, when the great rivers—the Ganges, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū and the Mahī—reach the great ocean, they give up their former names and designations and are simply called the great ocean, so too, when members of the four castes—khattiyas, brahmins, vessas, and suddas—go forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, they give up their former names and clans and are simply called ascetics following the Sakyan son. (Bodhi 2016, 121)

Rather than focus on social divisions, the Buddha emphasized the common humanity we all share. In this respect all are afflicted by the problems stated in the First Noble Truth, namely birth, sickness, old age, and death. Likewise, all struggle with the problem of craving and seek the peace and happiness of nirvana. It is said that those who are closer to the goal cease to think of themselves in terms of being superior (*seyyo*), inferior (*niceyyo*), or equal (*sarikkho*) (Sn 918). The Buddha was not blind to the divisions and inequality in his own society but saw these as circumstances that could be changed.

However, he did not call explicitly for the abolition of the caste system and his view was that change should come gradually through peaceful means rather than revolution. His position has been summed up as follows:

> The Buddhist texts constantly refer to the theory of caste which the Brahmin priesthood tried to impose on society—justifying on religious grounds and attempting to perpetuate caste prejudice and discrimination—as a mere propagandist cry (*ghoso*) on their part. Such propaganda was met by the Buddhists by appealing to the historical facts about the origins of caste which gave no basis for the rigidity of caste structure or for prejudice and discrimination between castes, since caste names were in origin and even in the time of the Buddha designations denoting differences of occupation. (Malalasera and Jayatilleke 2006, 29)

Resolving disputes

No human society is free of conflicts, and it is important to understand how these arise and to develop strategies for dealing with them. The question as to why conflicts arise was once posed to the Buddha by Sakka, the king of the gods.

> Sakka, ruler of the devas, asked the Blessed One: 'Beings wish to live without hate, hostility, or enmity; they wish to live in peace. Yet they live in hate, harming one another, hostile, and as enemies. By what fetters are they bound, sir, that they live in such a way? (Bodhi 2016, 131).

The Buddha answers that conflicts arise from 'bonds of envy and miserliness.' He explains that these arise in turn from liking and disliking, desire, and ultimately 'elaborated perceptions and notions' (*papañca-saññāsaṅkhā*), a term Bodhi explains as 'perceptions and ideas that have become "infected" by subjective biases' (2016, 203).

A similar question was posed to Mahākaccāna by a brahmin who asked, 'Why is it, Master Kaccāna, that *khattiyas* fight with *khattiyas*, brahmins with brahmins, and householders with householders?' The reply was that it is due to lust for sensual pleasures that members of these social classes fight among themselves. Mahākaccāna was then asked a follow-up question, namely 'Why is it, Master Kaccāna, that ascetics fight with ascetics?' In this case the answer was slightly different, namely that it is lust for views and bondage to views that gave rise to disputes among ascetics (Bodhi 2016, 132).

The propensity for disputes about views to occur among ascetics is illustrated in the parable of the blind men and the elephant (*Udāna* 6.4). Here the Buddha narrates how a former king of Sāvatthī asked a group of blind men to describe an elephant. After examining different parts of the animal, the blind men were unable to reach agreement and came to blows each asserting a different opinion about the nature of the beast. This tale calls to mind the

diverse views of the six rival teachers mentioned in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* (The Fruits of the Homeless Life) (DN2), and the 62 wrong views listed in the preceding *Brahmajāla Sutta* (The Supreme Net) (DN1).

The Buddha specified six roots of discord among members of the *saṅgha*. These were that 1) a monk is angry and hostile; 2) a denigrator and insolent; 3) envious and miserly; 4) crafty and hypocritical; 5) has evil desires and wrong view; 6) adheres to his own views (Bodhi 2016, 137). In one notorious incident a bitter dispute arose among the monks of Kosambī (MN 128). The Buddha tried to intervene three times but his efforts at reconciliation were of no avail. Only later did the monks settle their difference and seek the Buddha's forgiveness.

When asked by the Venerable Upali to explain the nature of schism in the *saṅgha*, the Buddha specified ten reasons why schisms arise:

> 'How, Bhante, is there schism in the Sangha?' 'Here, Upali, (1) monks explain non-Dhamma as Dhamma, (2) and Dhamma as non-Dhamma. (3) They explain non-discipline as discipline, and (4) discipline as non-discipline. 5) They explain what has not been stated and uttered by the Tathāgata as having been stated and uttered by him, and (6) what has been stated and uttered by the Tathāgata as not having been stated and uttered by him. (7) They explain what has not been practiced by the Tathāgata as having been practiced by him, and (8) what has been practiced by the Tathāgata as not having been practiced by him. (9) They explain what has not been prescribed by the Tathāgata as having been prescribed by him, and (10) what has been prescribed by the Tathāgata as not having been prescribed by him. On these ten grounds they withdraw and go apart. They perform legal acts separately and recite the Pātimokkha separately. It is in this way, Upāli, that there is schism in the Sangha.' (Bodhi 2016, 137)

By contrast, concord is established when these ten errors are rectified.

Social relationships

Having considered some general principles of social harmony, we turn now to consider relationships among the social units that form the building blocks of societies. The most basic social element is the individual, but a society is more than a collection of atomic individuals. Individuals are like grains of sand, and however many we add to a heap they will not constitute a society unless there is something that binds them together. A society only comes into being when individuals build relationships through a network of reciprocal commitments.

After the individual, the most fundamental social unit is husband and wife. These enjoy a reciprocal relationship normally through marriage, and from their union arise children. The husband and wife then assume additional responsibilities as parents. The children attend school and have relationships

with their teachers, make friends with other children, and become part of the larger school community. When children leave school, they find employment and as employees have a relationship with their employers. Outside of work they may become members of clubs for recreation and other purposes, and in many societies, they will be lay members of a religious community and have a relation with monks, priests, and other religious figures.

As the Buddha's influence spread and lay membership increased, the Buddha broadened the range and scope of his teachings to embrace wider social networks of the kind just mentioned. As Bodhi observes:

> The Buddha also taught and guided people who chose to follow his teachings at home, as lay disciples, living in the midst of their families and working at their regular occupations. He was thus faced with the additional task of laying down guidelines for society as a whole. In addition to a basic code of lay precepts, he had to offer principles to ensure that parents and children, husbands and wives, employers and employees, and people from very different backgrounds and social classes would be able to live together amicably. In the face of these challenges the scope of the Dhamma expanded. From its original character as a path to spiritual liberation, centered around contemplative practices and philosophical insights, it gave rise to a broad ethic that applied not only to individual conduct but to the relations between people living under diverse conditions. (Bodhi 2016, 3)

The *Sigālaka Sutta*

The Buddha set out his vision for society in an important discourse known as the *Sigālaka Sutta* (DN 31). The *sutta* relates how once when the Buddha was staying at Rājagaha he came upon Sigālaka the householder paying homage to the six directions as his father had taught him. The Buddha informed him that his practice was not in accordance with the Ariyan discipline, and imbued the practice with a new meaning, as follows:

> And how, householder's son, does the Ariyan disciple protect the six directions? These six things are to be regarded as the six directions. The east denotes mother and father. The south denotes teachers; The west denotes wife and children. The north denotes friends and companions. The nadir denotes servants, workers and helpers. The zenith denotes ascetics and Brahmins. (DN iii.188)

Here, the Buddha breaks society down into six social units, each unit involving a bilateral relationship between two groups as shown in Table 1, making a total of twelve in all. The *Sigālaka Sutta* is of great interest both for the way it sets out a vision of society as consisting of these twelve interlocking groups, as well as for the attention to detail in specifying the duties of each group. This arrangement demonstrates that the Buddha believed that the welfare of individual and society are interdependent. Thus, the well-being of society

depends on the proper internal functioning of each of the six social units, and the health of each of the six units in turn is influenced by the wider society in which they are embedded.

Direction	Party 1	Party 2
1. East	Parents	Children
2. South	Teachers	Pupils
3. West	Wives	Husbands
4. North	Friends	Companions
5. Zenith	Clergy	Laity
6. Nadir	Employers	Employees

Table 1: The Six Directions

In the *sutta*, the Buddha spells out the specific duties incumbent upon each of the twelve groups. As regards the first group—parents and children—the Buddha says that a child should think and act in the following manner towards his parents:

1. Once supported by them, I will now be their support
2. I will perform duties incumbent on them
3. I will keep up the lineage and tradition
4. I will make myself worthy of my heritage
5. I will transfer merits in due time

Parents in turn have a reciprocal duty to towards their children to:

1. Restrain them from vice
2. Exhort them to virtue
3. Train them for a profession
4. Contract suitable marriages for them
5. Hand over their inheritance in due time

Family obligations were seen as extremely important. The *Mangala Sutta* (Sn 2.4) notes:

> Support for one's parents,
> assistance to one's wife and children,
> consistency in one's work:
> This is the highest protection.
> Giving, living in rectitude,
> assistance to one's relatives,
> deeds that are blameless:
> This is the highest protection.

The Vinaya allows monks to take care of their aged parents and provide them with food and other necessaries (Vin i.147). The *Parabhava Sutta* (Sn 1.6) warns of the failure to support one's parents: 'Though being well-to-do, not to support father and mother who are old and past their youth—this is a cause of one's downfall.'

Elsewhere, the Buddha had more to say about the parent-child relationship:

> Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over this great earth abounding in the seven treasures, one still would not have done enough for one's parents, nor would one have repaid them. For what reason? Parents are of great help to their children; they bring them up, feed them, and show them the world. (AN i.62)

Friendship

Beyond the immediate family our most meaningful relationships are with our friends, and friendship is the fundamental principle on which Buddhist social ethics are based. In the words of Rajavaramuni, 'We might conclude that in Buddhist ethics everyone is a friend, meaning that everyone should be treated as a friend' (1990, 36). On this basis the ideal society is 'a society of "good friends" in which people live together for their mutual benefit, where all environmental conditions are favorable also to individual development and perfection' (1990, 49).

According to the *Sigālaka Sutta*, as the 'northern direction' friends should be treated as follows:

> There are five ways in which a man should minister to his friends and companions as the northern direction: by gifts, by kindly words, by looking after their welfare, by treating them like himself, and by keeping his word. And there are five ways in which friends and companions, thus ministered to by a man as the northern direction, will reciprocate: by looking after him when he is inattentive, by looking after his property when he is inattentive, by being a refuge when he is afraid, by not deserting him when he is in trouble, and by showing concern for his children. In this way the northern direction is covered, making it at peace and free from fear. (DN iii.190)

Elsewhere, the Buddha explains that 'good friendship' (*kalyāṇamittatā*) is valued for the support it provides for the cultivation of virtue.

> And what is good friendship? Here, in whatever village or town a clansman lives, he associates with householders or their sons—whether young but of mature virtue, or old and of mature virtue—who are accomplished in faith, virtuous behaviour, generosity, and wisdom; he converses with them and engages in discussions with them. Insofar as they are accomplished in faith, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in faith; insofar as they are accomplished in virtuous behaviour, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in virtuous behaviour; insofar as they are accomplished in generosity, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in generosity; insofar as they are accomplished in wisdom, he emulates them with respect to their accomplishment in wisdom. This is called good friendship. (AN iv.282f)

As Bodhi observes, there are many reasons why friendship is beneficial:

> Good friendship is essential not only because it benefits us in times of trouble, satisfies our social instincts, and enlarges our sphere of concern from the self to others. It is critical because good friendship plants in us the sense of discretion, the ability to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, and to choose the honorable over the expedient. Therefore the Buddha says that all other good qualities unfold from good friendship. (Bodhi 2016, 85)

Friendship is also central to the religious life, and on one occasion when Ānanda suggested that friendship was half of the religious life (*brahmacariya*) the Buddha corrected him declaring that good friendship was 'the whole of the spiritual life' (SN v.2). It is said that when a bhikkhu has good friends this is 'the first proximate cause for the development of the aids to enlightenment' (AN iv.357), as well as being 'a quality that serves as a protector' (AN v.23). We see that the friendship of good people is a powerful incubator of virtue and learn there is 'no single thing that so causes unarisen wholesome qualities to arise and arisen unwholesome qualities to decline as good friendship' (AN i.14). Friendship is threatened by immorality: sexual misconduct leads to 'enmity and rivalry' and divisive speech to being 'divided from one's friends' (AN v.247). Friendship with immoral people is not encouraged, and such people should be seen as what they are, namely foes in the guise of friends (DN iii.185).

The *Saṅgha*

The *Sigālaka Sutta* also speaks of relations between monks and laity. It recommends that the laity should minister to the religious teachers and groups like the *saṅgha* by:

1. Treating them with affection in their acts
2. Treating them with affection in their speech
3. Treating them with affection in their mind
4. Keeping their houses open to them
5. Supplying their temporal needs

Religious teachers turn have the obligation to care for the laity in the following ways. We note that they have an additional sixth duty in addition to the usual five.

1. Restraining them from evil
2. Exhorting them to do good
3. Loving them with kindly thoughts
4. Teaching them what they have not heard before
5. Correcting and purifying what they have heard already
6. Revealing to them the way to a heavenly state

The Buddhist community as a whole consists of four assemblies, namely monks, nuns, lay male devotees and lay female devotees. The Dhamma flourishes when the four assemblies recognize their obligations and support one another, as we see from the *Itivuttaka* (111).

> Monks, householders are very helpful to you. They provide you with the requisites of robes, almsfood, lodgings, and medicines in time of sickness. And you, monks, are very helpful to householders, as you teach them the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, the middle, and the end, with the right meaning and wording, and you proclaim the spiritual life in its fulfillment and complete purity. Thus, monks, this spiritual life is lived with mutual support for the purpose of crossing the flood and making a complete end of suffering. (Bodhi 2016, 124)

The aim is a stable society. As Rajavaramuni notes:

> A peaceful, stable, and secure society is ideally favorable to the individual growth, development, and perfection of every person. If society is in turmoil, suffering from instability and insecurity, even the monks who are engaged in the task of individual perfection, not to speak of other more materialistic people, may have to stop or suspend their efforts (1990, 36).

A stable society consists of a plurality of individual groups, societies and organizations sharing a common moral vision and supporting one another. As Rajavaramuni notes, 'In sum, a moral community is diversity in unity. Harmonious diversities or variety make a complete whole. Hence monastic and lay groupings, not to speak of many minor ones, are intended to continue in harmony as necessary components of a society, and it is with their continuity that a good society is maintained' (1990, 32).

As a smaller 'intentional' community the *saṅgha* depends upon the wider lay community for economic support. The Buddha acknowledged this interdependency when he stated 'My living is dependent upon others' (AN v.87). In return for this economic support the *saṅgha* provides religious teaching and example to the laity. Monks have a special mission in society, and the Buddha admonished them as follows: 'Go, monks, on your journey, for the profit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the profit, the happiness of gods and men' (Vin i.20).

The Buddha reminded the monks that they have neither parents nor relatives to take care of them and so must look after one another. If a teacher falls ill, the pupil must take care of him, and vice versa, and if one or other is unavailable the *saṅgha* itself should assume the responsibility (Vin i.301ff). As an example of this, on one occasion the Buddha came across a sick monk whose body was covered with sores. He boiled water and washed the monk with his own hands, after which he cleaned and dried his robes (DhpA i.319).

Buddhism places a high value on social harmony and the *saṅgha* provides a model for the ideal community. In contrast to other mendicant groups, which were described as rowdy and divided, the peace and harmony of the *saṅgha* was often remarked on by observers. King Pasenadi describes the monks as

'living in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes' (MN ii.120f). The elder Anuruddha describes his relationship with monastic colleagues in the following terms: 'It is a gain for me, it is a great gain for me that I am living with such companions in the holy life. I maintain bodily acts of loving-kindness towards these venerable ones both openly and privately; I maintain verbal acts of loving-kindness towards them both openly and privately; I maintain mental acts of loving-kindness towards them both openly and privately' (MN iii.156). These are the attitudes should ideally be cultivated in the wider society.

Conclusion

Bhikkhu Bodhi opens his compilation *The Buddha's Teachings on Social Harmony* with the following sobering remark: 'Conflict and violence have plagued humankind from time immemorial, leaving the annals of history stained with blood. While the human heart has always stirred with the yearning for peace, harmony, and loving fellowship, the means of satisfying this yearning have ever proved elusive.' He expands as follows:

> Social systems are constantly torn by class struggles, in which the elite class seeks to amass more privileges and the subordinate class to achieve greater rights and more security. Whether it is the conflict between masters and slaves, between feudal lords and serfs, between the aristocrats and the common people, between capital and labor, it seems that only the faces change while the underlying dynamics of the power struggle remain the same. (2016, 1)

Today, the lives of individuals are tightly controlled by social and political institutions, and economic well-being is determined by multinational corporations and global trade. As we move ever-closer to a single global order, the option of 'dropping out' and retreating to a hermit-like existence in the forest is no longer possible for most people. In these circumstances, it is more important than ever to become aware of the often-unconscious values and presuppositions that shape modern society and reflect on whether they are consistent with Buddhist principles.

Ironically, developments like globalization do not seem to bring people closer but foster a culture of individualism and aggressive competition for limited resources. This results in the fragmentation of communities and the growth of nationalism and violent conflict. The effect of these forces is visible in the West even at the level of the basic social unit of the family. As Bhikkhu Bodhi laments in relation to the USA: 'No longer is the family a close harmonious unit held together by ties of love, respect, self-sacrifice, and cooperation. Instead it has become a symbiotic pact, a union of convenience, in which each member seeks his or her personal advantage, often by exploiting and hurting the other members' (2000, 23). The family breakdown referred to is a microcosm of many modern societies.

Solutions to the social problems described above require collaboration and cooperation across society at large. The challenges we face today cannot be overcome by individuals acting alone. Cooperation, however, must be inspired by ethical values lest it turn into just another ‘power grab’ or an attempt by one group to impose its will on others. Cooperation inspired by the Dhamma would prioritize spiritual fulfilment while ensuring that material well-being is accorded an appropriate but subservient place.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Buddhism is often depicted as 'otherworldly' or 'world-negating' insofar as its primary goal is to escape from the suffering of *saṃsāra*. However, while Buddhism is indeed a soteriology (a salvation religion) it does not ignore the social dimension of human life and the ways in which this can help or hinder the quest for liberation.
- Buddhist social teachings emphasise tolerance, the Golden Rule, the avoidance of discrimination, and the peaceful resolution of disputes
- Society can be pictured as a series of overlapping concentric circles involving reciprocal rights and duties. The cornerstone of any community, whether lay or monastic, is friendship.
- The *saṅgha* provides a model for the ideal community in illustrating how good social relationships depend on mutual respect and support.
- The Buddha recognized social injustice and inequality, as in the caste system, but did not propose radical solutions. He believed that social change should come about through individual change.

Discussion questions

1. Can we change society just by changing our minds?
2. Why did the Buddha not seek to abolish the caste system?
3. Why does the Buddha speak so highly of friendship?
4. Can the *saṅgha* provide a blueprint for the ideal society?
5. Why do disputes arise, and how can we solve them?
6. Does Buddhism lack social relevance today, particularly for the young?

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Chapter Two
Engaged Buddhism

In this chapter

Engaged Buddhism is a modern movement that some regard as a new Buddhist 'vehicle'. In this chapter we review the origins of the movement and introduce its main protagonists. We examine the debate over whether engaged Buddhism is something new or whether Buddhism has always been 'engaged.' We consider the extent to which engaged Buddhist ideas innovate or depart from traditional teachings and consider the counterclaim of 'disengaged' Buddhism that engagement has never formed part of Buddhist practice. We also consider whether movements that endorse the use of violence can be part of the engaged Buddhist movement. The chapter concludes with brief discussion of 'Buddhist modernism' and its view that traditional beliefs like karma and rebirth are incompatible with science.

Introduction

Engaged Buddhism is a form of Buddhist practice that applies Buddhist teachings to political, social, and environmental issues. Engaged Buddhism emerged as a distinct movement in the 1960s and subsequent decades and focuses on questions of public policy such as social justice, human rights, poverty, politics, violence, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, identity, and climate change. As can be seen, it is active on many fronts with the aim of reducing the suffering that arises in these contexts. In this chapter we concentrate on the history and general features of the movement.

The promotion of engaged Buddhism owes much to the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-2022). Nhat Hanh was ordained as a monk at the age of sixteen and subsequently spent periods abroad in the USA teaching at Columbia University. Following the communist victory in Vietnam he was refused re-entry to the country and established a community at Plum Village in the south of France. Paul Fuller notes that the term 'engaged Buddhism' is Nhat Hanh's translation of the title of a book he wrote in Vietnamese entitled *Dao Phat Di Vao Cuoc Doi* ('Buddhism Entering Into Society') published in 1964. Nhat Hanh began to use the term 'engaged Buddhism' widely from 1967 (Fuller 2021, 4f). The longer form 'socially engaged Buddhism' is also used but is now less common.

Engaged Buddhism links three ideas emphasizing awareness in daily life, social service, and social activism. This threefold emphasis not only establishes a connection with socio-political issues but also involves the lives

of families and communities. In this way, engaged Buddhism has an impact on the lives of individual Buddhists living 'in the world'. The movement Nhat Hanh helped found has become so successful worldwide that one Buddhist scholar—Christopher Queen—has argued that it constitutes a new 'vehicle', joining the previously identified three vehicles of Buddhism (Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna).

The formative 'canon' of this movement, Queen suggests (1996), consists of three publications. In chronological order, these are Henry Steel Olcott's *A Buddhist Catechism* (1881); Anagarika Dharmapāla's *Gihi Vinaya: The Daily Code for the Laity* (1898); and Bhimrao Ambedkar's *The Buddha and his Dharma* (1957). These writings helped foment the movement that would later flower as the new 'vehicle' (*yāna*) known as 'engaged Buddhism'. As with the preceding vehicles, there is considerable internal diversity. Although it has many illustrious figureheads, some of whom will be mentioned below, engaged Buddhism is not a unified movement and lacks an official hierarchy. Many of the leading figures in the movement are 'scholar-practitioners', in other words individuals with one foot in the academy and another in Buddhist communities.

Inspired by its social ideals, engaged activists have worked to extend traditional Buddhist moral principles into a comprehensive program of Buddhist social ethics. Critical to the attempt is the ambition to extend moral practice beyond the Five Precepts. An example of this can be seen in the supplementary fourteen precepts of the Tiep Hien Order or 'Order of Interbeing', a community of activist-practitioners founded by Nhat Hanh in 1966. Originally known as the 'Fourteen Precepts of the Order of Interbeing,' they were later termed the 'Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings' or the 'Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism' (Fuller 2021, 39).

The fourteen guidelines for engaged Buddhism

1. Do not be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even a Buddhist one.
2. Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless absolute truth.
3. Do not force others to adopt your views, whether by authority, threat, money, propaganda, or even education.
4. Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes to suffering.
5. Do not accumulate wealth while millions remain hungry.
6. Do not maintain anger or hatred.
7. Do not lose yourself in distraction, inwardly or outwardly.
8. Do not utter words that can create discord or cause your community to split apart.
9. Do not say untruthful things for the sake of personal advantage or to impress people.
10. Do not use the Buddhist community for personal gain or profit or transform your community into a political party.

11. Do not live with a vocation that is harmful to humans or nature.
12. Do not kill. Do not let others kill.
13. Possess nothing that should belong to others.
14. Do not mistreat your body.

As in common in Buddhism, the fourteen guidelines are arranged according to the scheme of body, speech, and mind, although here in reverse order. Thus, precepts one to seven concern the mind, seven and eight relate to speech, and ten to fourteen deal with the body.

Another attempt to expand traditional moral practice is the suggestion by Queen that there are now four different 'styles' of Buddhist ethics. The first is 'The Ethics of Discipline', in which the conduct caused by mental impurities fuelled by the 'three poisons' of greed, hatred, and delusion are combated by observing the five vows of the laity. Here the focus is on the individual Buddhist practitioner. Next comes 'The Ethics of Virtue', in which the individual's relationship with others comes more clearly into focus by engaging in such practices as loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. This marks a shift from observing strict rules to following a more internally enforced ethical framework. Third, there is 'The Ethics of Altruism', in which service to others predominates.

Finally—and this is the specific contribution of engaged Buddhism—there is the comprehensive 'Ethics of Engagement', in which the three previous prescriptions for daily living are applied to the overall concern for a better society, which means creating new social institutions and relationships. Since social institutions are believed to contribute to the arising of greed, hatred, and delusion, these new or reformed institutions will provide better spiritual alternatives. Such an approach involves, as Queen maintains, awareness, identification of the self and the world, and a profound call to action. Another term for 'engagement' is 'activism', which Thomas Tweed defines as 'the concern to uplift individuals, reform societies, and participate energetically in the political and economic spheres' (quoted in Lele 2019, 244). This activist mentality is shared by non-governmental organisations (NGO) throughout the world, Buddhist and otherwise. Many Asian engaged Buddhist leaders have, like Nhat Hanh, spent time in the West, and their views reflect the influence of Western social liberalism of a more or less radical kind.

New perspectives

Engaged Buddhism is clearly a broad church. What, if any, are its defining features? Various authors have addressed this question and come up with different—often overlapping—criteria. One of the foremost authorities in the field, Sallie B. King, has identified six principles of engaged Buddhism, namely: 1) causation; 2) the four noble truths; 3) interdependence; 4) engaged spirituality; 5) non-violence; 6) non-adversaliality (2012).

Christopher Queen identifies three important characteristics: 1) awareness or mindfulness of the interdependence of self and others; 2) identification of self and the world; 3) the imperative of action (2000, 6–7). Paul Fuller sums up the key elements in the different models of engaged Buddhism as follows: 'In all of these models, a number of key ideas become clear: action, interdependence, and compassion' (2021, 16). Other authors have further shaded in the contours of this broad and complex movement, but the main outlines at least should now be clear.

As Fuller points out in his introduction to engaged Buddhism, the engaged Buddhist movement gives traditional Buddhist teachings an innovative twist. The fundamental claim of traditional Buddhism is that life is suffering and accordingly its priority is to escape from the cycle of rebirth. Engaged Buddhism, on the contrary, claims that *saṃsāra* can be 'fixed' if we employ the right techniques. As Fuller notes, 'In traditional Buddhism, suffering originates in the mind and meditation is practised to alleviate ignorance. In engaged Buddhism, suffering originated in the world, and peaceful protest and activism are used to change the world' (Fuller 2021, 21).

A fundamental philosophical tenet of engaged Buddhism is the notion of dependent origination (*paṭicca-sammuppāda*). In its early form this doctrine is a teaching about causation which explains how individuals become trapped in the cycle of rebirth. The doctrine postulates a series of twelve links in the form of a circle, each link having a preceding cause and serving as the cause of the succeeding link. In engaged Buddhism, this doctrine receives a new interpretation, and becomes known as 'interdependence'. Fuller describes this new interpretation as a 'hybrid' doctrine, and contrasts the earlier and later forms as follows:

> In traditional accounts dependent-origination describes a world of conditionality which is precarious and impermanent and pervaded by suffering . . . It is a process that binds individuals to the cycle of rebirth. The modern accounts of interdependence are often imbued with a sense of wonder. They are a description of how everything is connected, a sense of natural togetherness, how nature, humans, animals and the ecological environment are dependent on each other for their existence. There is a focus upon this life or, much wider, the well-being of the planet over vast periods of time. One could say that the former is pessimistic and the latter optimistic; the former has no interest in involvement in the world, while the latter's involvement in the world, particularly the natural environment is essential. (2021, 62)

This vision of cosmic interdependence has its origin in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (3rd–4th century CE) a scripture of the Hua Yen school of Chinese Buddhism. It is in this text that the famous image of Indra's net occurs, this being an extensive net with a jewel sewn into each node which reflects all the other jewels and is reflected by them in turn. Supposedly, this represents

the vision of the world as perceived by the awakened, a world in which all phenomena intermingle without obstruction. This image is extremely important in eco-Buddhism, as we will see when discussing ecology in Chapter 8, but more broadly it may be thought of as the fundamental 'creed' of engaged Buddhism. As mentioned, Fuller suggests it can be seen as a hybrid doctrine which is a synthesis of five basic Buddhist ideas: dependent origination, not-self, emptiness, conditionality, and impermanence (2021, 65). The key implications of this doctrine are that everything is part of a process in which there are no enduring selves or essences; all phenomena are void of own being and depend on something else for their existence; and all phenomena are impermanent because they come into being and pass away.

The term 'interbeing' was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe the idea of interdependence just described. The notion resonates with contemporary systems theory and quantum physics, drawing Buddhism more closely into the orbit of Western science, a development welcomed by Buddhist modernists, as we will see below. Many leading Buddhists, including the Dalai Lama, are keen to emphasize Buddhism's compatibility with science and believe this confirms its suitability as a religion for the modern world. Such commentators claim—often citing the *Kālāma Sutta*—that Buddhism's teachings are not invalidated by science, and even that they anticipate the methodology of scientific empiricism. For many, this bolsters the appeal of the movement.

Apart from interdependence, a second innovation is an attempt to heal the rift between two realms that in traditional teachings are kept apart, namely the 'mundane' (*lokiya*) and the 'supramundane' (*lokuttara*). The former is the realm of worldly values, concerned with things such as gain, fame, praise and pleasure (AN iv.157). The latter is the realm of spiritual values like faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and understanding (SN v.193). Monks are encouraged to cultivate supramundane values and shun mundane ones, which inevitably leads to them becoming distanced from social and political concerns. This culminates in church and state having different spheres of influence, and even to their constitutional separation. While this separation has never been absolute in Buddhism, it inevitably discourages the *saṅgha* from playing an overt role in worldly affairs.

However, if suffering originates not only in the mind but also in the structure of societies, as engaged Buddhism believes, then it is clearly necessary to combat the problem on both fronts. One of the key aims of engaged Buddhism is therefore to abolish this dichotomy and critique the idea that there is any fundamental division between the mundane and the supramundane. It follows that monks will be freer to engage in politics, and layfolk will have more direct access to spiritual goals like awakening. The hope is that this will result in the creation of a Buddhist utopia or 'Dharmic society'.

Engaged Buddhist organisations

Although Buddhist communities from the major sectarian traditions have extensive programs in various aspects of engaged Buddhism, one of the most comprehensive is that of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship based in Berkeley, California. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship began in 1978 in Hawaii at the Maui Zendo as a project jointly founded by Robert and Anne Aitken, Nelson Foster, and a few of their Zen friends. Within a short time, this first American expression of engaged Buddhism was joined by an eclectic collection of Dharma colleagues that included beat poet Gary Snyder, scholar Alfred Bloom, Buddhist activist Joanna Macy, ex-Theravāda monk Jack Kornfield, and a number of other American convert practitioners.

The five aims of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship are: 1) to make public witness to Buddhist practice and interdependence as a way of peace and protection for all beings; 2) to raise peace, environmental, feminist, and social justice concerns among North American Buddhists; 3) to bring a Buddhist perspective of non-duality to contemporary social action and environmental movements; 4) to encourage the practice of non-violence based on the rich resources of traditional Buddhist and Western spiritual teachings; 5) to offer avenues for dialogue and exchange among the diverse North American and world *saṅghas*. The BPF is active largely among the American convert Buddhist population but works extensively with ethnic Buddhists and people of colour in an attempt to move beyond ethnic or racial insensitivities.

The international work of the BPF is organized through its association with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), launched in February 1989 in Thailand by peace activist Sulak Sivaraksa. The INEB has the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Mahā Ghosānanda as patrons. Sivaraksa is of Chinese descent and was born in Bangkok in 1933. His criticisms of the Thai government led to him being imprisoned and exiled on several occasions. Sivaraksa invokes traditional Buddhist values to challenge the exploitation he sees as endemic in global capitalism. Accordingly, he reinterprets the Five Precepts as obligations to: 1) prevent death by not letting people die of hunger; 2) to not overexploit natural resources; 3) to not allow the exploitation of women; 4) to reject untruth such as 'fake news' and political propaganda; and 5) to replace the production of intoxicants like drugs and tobacco with basic staple foods like rice.

Sivaraksa has proclaimed the idea of 'Buddhism with a small b'. The central idea here is to avoid rigidity in the interpretation of the Buddha's teachings or to becoming fixated on views and beliefs. What 'Buddhism with a small b' means more broadly has been summed up by Fuller in the following four points:

- Buddhism is a religion focused upon suffering, and this teaching is given in the four noble truths.

- To argue that Buddhism is primarily an ascetic religion, uninvolved in society, is a mistake.
- Buddhism from the outset had concepts promoting both inner and outer harmony: personal and social transformation are central to Buddhism.
- Buddhist ideas should not be reified; they should not be used to legitimate power, but to promote tolerance. It is not 'Buddhism' but 'buddhism'. (2021, 47)

Sivaraksa wants to see the *saṅgha* place less emphasis on myths, rituals, and the enactment of ceremonials that legitimate the interests of the powerful, and to recover the Buddha's original message of tolerance, wisdom, and universal love. The INEB has groups in more than thirty countries working toward the advancement of engaged Buddhism in an atmosphere of inter-Buddhist and inter-religious cooperation. Its aim is to support 'grassroots Dharma activism around the world'. Up to now, the major areas of INEB interest have been human rights, nonviolence, the environment, women's issues, alternative education, and the integration of spirituality and activism.

Another important organization is the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation established by the Taiwanese nun Cheng Yen. She was ordained by Humanistic Buddhism master Yin Shun in 1963 and was inspired to found Tzu Chi after a conversation with a Catholic nun who informed her about the charitable work carried out by the Catholic Church. Chen Yen began by helping poor families in Taiwan. Tzu Chi rapidly expanded and now provides medical care in its own hospitals and disaster relief in countries worldwide. Today it is one of the world's largest humanitarian organisations. Other organizations based in Taiwan that also follow 'Humanistic Buddhism' are Dharma Drum Mountain (Fagushan) and Buddha Light Mountain (Fo Guang Shan). Groups active in Japan include Soka Gakkai, Risshō Kōsei-Kai, and Nipponzan Myohoji. Other engaged organisations include Buddhist Global Relief (founded by the Venerable Bhikkhu Bodhi), the Zen Peacemaker Order (founded in 1994 by Bernie Glassman Roshi), and the Buddhist Action Coalition (founded in 2018 and based at the Union Theological Seminary in New York).

This list above is far from exhaustive, and there exist numerous smaller groups active in different regions or focused more narrowly on issues such as identity. For example, Sakyadhītā ('Daughters of the Buddha') is concerned primarily with the situation of female monastics, while Rainbodhi, the Gay Buddhist Fellowship, TransBuddhists, and the InternationalTrans Buddhist Saṅgha focus, as their names suggest, on issues of gender and sexuality.

Engaged Buddhism: old or new?

Opinion is currently divided on to what extent engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism forged by modernity in response to contemporary concerns, and to what extent it exhibits continuity with traditional attitudes. Thich Nhat Hanh has stated that Buddhists have always been socially engaged, and so a socially engaged Buddhism is 'nothing new'. 'If Buddhism is not engaged,'

he says, 'it is not real Buddhism' (quoted in Fuller 2021, 12). Supporters of this view stress that the characterisation of Buddhism as 'world-renouncing' is a caricature and point to the concept of the bodhisattva in which selfless service to others is the ideal. They also portray the Buddha himself as a social activist who chose to reform society by founding a *saṅgha* rather than a kingdom.

Apart from the Buddha, many historical figures are seen as early exemplars of 'engagement.' Emperor Aśoka (268–232 BCE), mentioned in the last chapter, was a great patron of Buddhism and is celebrated for his efforts to improve the material well-being of his subjects. Among his public works were the founding of hospitals for people and animals, the planting of roadside trees and groves, the digging of wells, and the construction of watering sheds and rest houses for travellers.

In the Mahāyāna tradition, Śāntideva (685–763) is highly regarded by engaged Buddhists for the compassionate ideals set out in his *Bodhicāryavatāra* (Introduction to the Bodhisattva Path). In Japan, a trio of reformers consisting of Hōnen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1263), and Dōgen (1200–53) are seen as having anticipated contemporary social activism. Other notable figures closer to our own time include Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891–1956), who converted to Buddhism and encouraged the mass conversion of Indian Dalits (outcastes). In Thailand, Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906–93) offered a humanistic interpretation of Buddhism and rejected the traditional notions of karma and rebirth, and in Sri Lanka A.T. Ariyaratne focuses on the empowerment of villagers, rural development, and social reform through the medium of his Sarvōdaya Śramadāna movement. We will meet some of these contemporary figures again when we discuss economics in Chapter 5. Some exponents of engaged Buddhism claim that while social ideals may have been latent in Buddhist teachings they were not actualized until modern times, and therefore engaged Buddhism constitutes a sufficient departure from tradition to merit recognition as a new movement in much the same way that Mahāyāna Buddhism came to be regarded as novel and distinctive. Arguments purporting to demonstrate both continuity and discontinuity with the past are commonly heard, and often refer to historical examples where Buddhism was seen to be more (or less) 'engaged'. Thomas Yarnall labels these two orientations 'traditionist' and 'modernist' (Yarnall 2003).

We noted above that Cheng Yen was inspired to found the Tzu Chi Foundation after a conversation with a Catholic nun, and some believe that Christianity has played a part in the emergence of engaged Buddhism. They see engaged Buddhist concern with social reform as inspired more by Christian notions of social service and activism than Buddhist teachings. The first stirrings of the engaged Buddhist movement have been traced by some writers, including Nhat Hanh, to the colonial period and the response of reformers like Anagārika Dharmapāla to Christian criticisms that Buddhism was 'passive' and

'other-worldly'. Dharmapāla himself believed that modern-day Sinhalas had become indolent and lazy, unlike the 'true' Sinhalas of the past. His solution was to reform Buddhism and present its teachings as promoting an energetic life of good works and social service. This development is sometimes labelled 'Protestant Buddhism' (Gombrich 2006). Often underlying such attitudes is the idea that the West has a more positive 'world-affirming' outlook in contrast to a 'world-denying' attitude on the part of Buddhism which sees life in *saṃsāra* as a series of meaningless cycles. As W.H. Sheldon expressed it:

> Here then is precisely where the Western love of the world changes the whole perspective. This world is *worth saving*, in all its complexities and particulars . . . If this world is to be perpetuated and perfected, it must still be *this* world; in brief, it must *change* what is bad or imperfect within it into something good, also within it. (Quoted in King 2001, 250 original emphasis)

Some suggest, after the manner of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (2003), that the notion of a pacifist Buddhism was part of a conspiracy by the colonial powers to weaken the resistance of indigenous populations as a prelude to dominating them politically. Others draw a parallel with the 'liberation theology' movement in Latin America and other parts of the developing world. In the book *Action Dharma*, James Deitrick describes this mingling of cultural values as 'the infusion of Euro-American thought into the veins of Buddhist Asia' (2003, 203). The arguments go back and forth and turn on how we understand the nature of Buddhism, but while it is fair to say that there is continuity at the level of values between ancient and modern Buddhism, there is undeniably discontinuity at the level of issues. Many of the issues which occupy engaged Buddhists are essentially of a contemporary nature and there is little evidence of concern for these matters in the ancient scriptures.

Ethnocentric engaged Buddhism

A point of some interest is whether there are any limits to what can count as 'engaged Buddhism'. Does the category include, for example, forms of Buddhism in which ethnicity and nationalism play a central role and which involve intolerance, discrimination, and violence? Fuller terms such movements 'ethnocentric engaged Buddhism' (2021, 141) and notes that they often arise when Buddhism is perceived to be under threat. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in contemporary Myanmar in 'The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion' commonly known through its acronym MaBaTha. MaBaTha grew out of an earlier movement known as 969 which encouraged Burmese to adopt a 'buy Buddhist' policy and only buy from shops owned by Buddhists. The policy was directed against Muslims out of fears that Muslims were becoming too populous and posed a threat to Buddhism.

A leading figure in the MaBaTha movement is the Buddhist monk Ashin Wirathu, based in Mandalay. In his fiery sermons he has claimed that Muslims are planning to take over the country and turn it into an Islamic

state. Such fears led to the passing of laws in 2015 to prevent the conversion of Buddhists to Islam and to prohibit Burmese women from marrying Muslim men. These and other measures were introduced with the aim of protecting the Dhamma, and hence could be seen as a manifestation of what might be termed 'protectionist engaged Buddhism', 'Buddhist protectionist ideology', or 'chauvinistic Buddhism'. The dynamic at work here is that Buddhism becomes associated with a particular ethnic identity, and the members of that ethnic group come to see themselves as guardians of the Dhamma. When the defenders have sufficient political momentum, the outcome can be a campaign of ethnic cleansing of the kind directed against the Rohingya minority in Rakhine Province. The hatred and violence involved in such campaigns leads many to question whether movements like MaBaTha can be considered as legitimate forms of engaged Buddhism, or indeed, as Buddhism of any kind.

Others point out, however, that Buddhism has always had strong ties to nationalism and ethnicity. Burmese identity is often summed up in the formula 'nation, language, and religion', and in neighbouring Thailand we find a similar slogan of 'nation, religion, and monarch'. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala identity is closely bound up with Buddhism, and the use of violence in defence of the Dhamma is widely seen as justifiable (Bartholomeusz 2002). There are many historical examples which confirm that contemporary ethnographic engaged Buddhism is not simply a modern aberration.

So, should movements like MaBaTha be included under the umbrella of 'engaged Buddhism'? An initial point in favour is that on any definition such movements are undeniably 'engaged' in social and political affairs. But are their activities 'Buddhist' in the required sense of the term? Clearly, they do not conform to the peace-loving, compassionate, image of Buddhism represented by the mainstream engaged Buddhism movement. We noted earlier that Sallie King included 'non-violence' and 'non-adversaliality' as two defining criteria of engaged Buddhism. The hostility directed towards ethnic minorities by ethnographic engaged Buddhists would therefore rule out such movements. They would also fall foul of many of the 'fourteen guidelines for engaged Buddhism' specified by Thich Nhat Hanh listed earlier. In the end it comes down to how one defines 'Buddhism' and the core values that animate it. If non-violence is an absolute value, it seems difficult for ethnocentric engaged Buddhism to be included as a legitimate expression of engaged Buddhism. As we will see in our discussion of violence in Chapter 4, however, the relationship between Buddhism and violence is a complex matter, and the perspective one adopts on that question will determine the view one takes as to whether ethnocentric engaged Buddhism can be considered a genuine manifestation of Buddhist engagement.

Disengaged Buddhism

Amod Lele has argued that in their enthusiasm for activist causes, engaged Buddhists have failed to take seriously a position he labels 'disengaged Buddhism'. This position, he suggests, has a long and distinguished history, at least in Indian Buddhism if not elsewhere. 'Disengaged Buddhism,' as the name suggests, takes an opposite stance to engaged Buddhism and believes that social and political activism is unfruitful and detrimental to spiritual progress.

Lele revisits a selection of texts from the classical period of Indian Buddhism (pre-eighth century CE) that are often adduced in support of the ideals of engaged Buddhism insofar as they stress the importance of virtues like compassion (*karuṇā*) and friendliness (*maitrī*). Engaged Buddhists take for granted that these virtues entail social and political activism, but Lele argues many sources discourage political activism on the ground that it can be harmful to spiritual well-being. Thus, while Mahāyāna authors like Śāntideva and Candrakīrti praise compassion and engagement this need not mean, Lele suggests, that they support or encourage political activism or seek systemic social change. *Compassionate* action does not necessarily mean *social* action.

According to Lele, 'disengaged' ideals were more widespread than has been recognised and have been 'hiding in plain sight' in many Buddhist scriptures. This is more evident in Theravāda sources. For example, the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* relates how after seeing the 'four sights' the Buddha chose the path of renunciation in preference to the career of political leadership mapped out for him by his father. The *Tiracchāna Kathā Sutta* suggests that discussion of social issues is 'pointless talk' and advises 'Do not engage in the various kinds of pointless talk: that is, talk about kings, thieves, and ministers of state; talk about armies, dangers and wars . . . talk about relations, vehicles, villages, towns, cities, and countries.' Such talk is pointless, it claims, 'Because, monks, this talk is unbeneficial, irrelevant to the fundamentals of the holy life, and does not lead to revulsion, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna' (SN v.420). It might be pointed out that the Buddha is here addressing monks, and while such talk is pointless for them—since they have left the world—it may not be pointless for layfolk and especially those charged with the governance of society.

The *Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta* (Discourse on the Lion's Roar of the *Cakkavatti*) is another early text that is often read by engaged Buddhists as advocating social reform (we will meet this text again in our discussion of politics in the next chapter). The text appears to support engagement because one passage relates how the failure of the king to support the needy led to a downward spiral of poverty and crime. The text as a whole, however, can also be read in a different way, as showing that however good or bad a society is it will inevitably change over time such that it is folly to expect any

social system to provide happiness of an enduring kind to its citizens. The real message of this text, then, a disengaged Buddhist might argue, is not to encourage monks to be social reformers but to be detached from society and 'be islands unto yourselves, be a refuge unto yourselves,' seeking refuge only in the Dhamma (DN iii.77). Contrary to the engaged Buddhist reading of the text, which suggest that material well-being is a pre-requisite for spiritual development, later sections of the *sutta* also show that the beings referred to raise themselves from bad material conditions through the exercise of virtue. Thus, Lele concludes, 'moral improvement is ultimately what makes the material conditions better' (2019, 264). Contrary to the understanding of engaged Buddhism, then, social institutions do not play a primary role in determining material well-being.

The disengaged understanding of Buddhism is not new and has been suggested by various authors. Gombrich writes of the Buddha: 'To present him as a sort of socialist is a serious anachronism. He never preached against social inequality, only declared its irrelevance to salvation. He neither tried to abolish the caste system nor to do away with slavery' (2006, 30). Winston King notes that 'though Buddhism had important social repercussions, it was not basically or consciously a social reform movement aiming at the production of a certain type of society—save perhaps a society of believers, i.e. monks, who were called upon to forsake the historical-political world and its concerns' (2001, 164). He adds:

> To tell the truth the Buddha had little, either of concern for society as such or of firm conviction for its possible improvability. To be sure there was an existent society and it was not to be destroyed. And there would always be a society as long as there were human beings in some sort of universe. But its fluctuations, the rise and fall of its empires and social orders, its improvement and decay, its forms and names, represented for the Buddha only the stage on which each man plays his essentially solitary drama. Social conditions might help or hinder man in his progress towards Nibbāna to some extent, but they could never be *fundamentally* bettered. Social orders would revolve perpetually in meaningless cycles, all within the realm of kamma-rebirth (*saṃsāra*), but arrive nowhere in particular. Certain it was that there was no real salvation to be found in the socio-historical context or in the improvement of its forms. (King 2001, 164 original emphasis)

Any social improvement that came about, disengaged Buddhism assumes, would result from the personal virtue of exemplary individuals influencing the surrounding society. The implicit Buddhist strategy for producing a perfect society appears to be to perfect the individual citizens that compose it. The hope is that 'Such personal goodness in the leaders of the world, as well as in their followers, will solve all the complicated problems of international finance, economics, and politics' (King 2001, 195). This hypothesis, however, is nowhere critically examined or tested. As King expresses it:

> In passing we may observe that few Buddhist moralists have yet faced the basic questions raised by Reinhold Niebuhr in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society*: Does personal virtue carry directly over into social virtue? Are the two actually the same, in fact? Does individual 'progress' mean the same as social 'progress'? (2001, 168)

Apart from actively discouraging social engagement, many texts see the institution of kingship (and by extension all political institutions) as inimical to spiritual development. This is a well-established theme in Buddhist literature and one we will return to in the next chapter. We noted above how engaged Buddhism seeks to close the gap between the mundane (*lokiya*) and supramundane (*lokuttara*) spheres. Disengaged Buddhism naturally rejects this approach. As Lele puts it, 'it is folly to seek the kinds of worldly goods that social activism can secure, rather than the more important goods of mental cultivation. It is also why one must avoid participation in the political action that is likely to increase the hatred (*dveṣa* or *dosa*) in our minds' (2019, 280). Lele sums up by posing the following rhetorical questions:

> *Is it the case* that the goods activism can provide are inherently unsatisfactory and therefore unworthy of our seeking, for ourselves and for others? If so, then social activism is indeed a worthless pastime, just as the disengaged Buddhists say it is, and the engaged Buddhists are sadly deluded, for they are leading themselves and others *away* from liberation. *Is it the case* that political participation necessarily makes it impossible to attain the tranquility that has been held throughout the ages as a central Buddhist goal? If so, then Buddhists *should not* be politically engaged, and perhaps nobody should. (2019, 281f. original emphasis)

Lele's thesis is that primary sources that reject engagement represent a thoughtful and considered position rather than a simple failure to consider the merits of engagement. It is therefore incorrect to regard traditional Buddhism as simply 'underdeveloped' with respect to social and political issues. In fact, the tradition has carefully considered the pros and cons of engagement and decided against it. On this view, Buddhism is simply not interested in such questions and believes that involvement in social and political affairs is a distraction from spiritual goals.

Modern Buddhism and Buddhist modernism

As mentioned, engaged Buddhism traces many of its roots to the encounter between Buddhism and the West during the colonial period. We have also referred to the phenomenon of 'Protestant' Buddhism, which describes developments resulting from the impact on Buddhism of Protestant Christianity. The increased importance of the laity and an emphasis on the study of texts is one feature of this interaction. The encounter with the colonial powers affected the relationship between Buddhism and the West in other ways, many of which are relevant to our understanding of the contemporary phenomenon of engaged Buddhism. Natalie Quli has summarised some of the main features of modern Buddhism as follows:

> (1) Reason and rationality are given a privileged position; (2) the tendency to define Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion; (3) increased status of women; (4) the laity is given a prominent position; (5) meditation is a central practice and widely practiced by lay people. (Quoted in Fuller 2021, 52)

Quli goes on to mention other points such as an optimistic belief that nirvana is attainable in the present life, an interest in social engagement, a rejection of superstition and 'folk' religion, an emphasis on doctrines and texts as opposed to relic veneration or chanting, the importance of democracy, and a return to the 'original' teachings of the Buddha as found in the Pali canon. Western Buddhism has been shaped by these ideas and it is unsurprising to find many of them present in engaged Buddhism. It would be simplistic, however, to imagine that the encounter described above marks a watershed and that before this time Buddhism was not engaged in any shape or form. There is evidence to support the idea of Buddhism having been engaged to some degree in different times and places. Nevertheless, the encounter with the West has left a deep impression and resulted in the creation of many new offshoots and 'microsects' of Buddhism. We will return to the theme of Buddhist modernism and especially its relation to science in the final chapter.

There is evidence that modernist trends are accelerating and taking a 'postmodern turn.' In this development, selective features of the traditional and modern are intertwined in a blend of scientific, psychological, and traditional Buddhist discourses. Issues of race, gender, and inclusion and 'intersectionality' are raised as a challenge to some of the universalist and egalitarian assumptions of Buddhist modernism. As portrayed by Ann Gleig in *American Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Modernity* (2019) the earlier modernist picture of Buddhism as a unified tradition and an independent world religion is increasingly fragmenting into a kaleidoscope of diverse groups, identities, and intersectional affiliations.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Engaged Buddhism emerged as a distinct movement in the 1960s and following decades. It focuses on questions of public policy such as social justice, human rights, poverty, politics, violence, and the environment.
- Influential Asian patrons of the movement include Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Mahā Ghosānanda. Important Engaged Buddhist organisations include the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi, Buddhist Global Relief, the Zen Peacemaker Order, and the Buddhist Action Coalition.
- Opinion is divided on to what extent Engaged Buddhism is a new form of Buddhism, forged by modernity in response to contemporary concerns, and to what extent it exhibits continuity with traditional Buddhism. Amod Lele has suggested that traditional Buddhism was deliberately 'disengaged' because it saw involvement in politics as a distraction and harmful to spiritual practice.
- A development known as 'Buddhist modernism' shares some of the ideals of engaged Buddhism but breaks with tradition in rejecting beliefs like karma and rebirth as incompatible with science. Buddhist 'modernism' has its origins in the work of nineteenth-century Asian Buddhists like Anagārika Dharmapāla who presented Buddhism as rational and scientific as part of a defensive response to Western colonialism, imperialism, and proselytizing.

Discussion questions

1. How would you define 'engaged Buddhism'?
2. Was Buddhism before the modern period 'engaged' or 'disengaged'?
3. Who have been the leading engaged Buddhist activists in Asia?
4. Is engagement harmful to spiritual progress?
5. Can the use of violence be justified in promoting the goals of engaged Buddhism?
6. Can you be a Buddhist without believing in rebirth?

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Chapter Three
Politics

In this chapter

A recurring theme in the preceding chapters has been the relation between the individual and society. The science of politics addresses this topic directly. It may be helpful to distinguish first between 'politics' and 'government.' *Government* refers to the institutions authorized to make and enforce decisions for a specific population. These institutions include parliaments, senates, and people's congresses together with a plethora of subsidiary bodies responsible for collecting taxes, enforcing justice, and so on. *Politics* is concerned with the principles or ideologies (for example democracy or communism) on which governments are founded, including such radical beliefs as that governments should be abolished altogether (anarchism). Thus, we might say that a given government is the embodiment of a political theory. Drawing on this distinction, we can say that Buddhism has had more to say about government than politics. It is only in the modern period that scholars like Ian Harris and Michael Moore have placed politics on the scholarly agenda. Politics, as we saw in the last chapter, is also a central concern of engaged Buddhism.

Introduction

Michael Moore comments that to ask what Buddhism says about politics is 'an impossibly large and vague task' (2016, 15). However, we can make a start by classifying the available literature (both primary and secondary) into two categories: descriptive and normative. *Descriptive* literature informs us what, as a matter of fact, Buddhism teaches about politics and government, and how Buddhists have interpreted and applied these teachings both today and in the past. *Normative* literature, by contrast, is concerned with arguments about the stance Buddhists *should* adopt on political questions, for example whether they should favour a particular form of government (such as republican, monarchic, or anarchist) or a particular political theory (such as democracy or Marxism). In keeping with this distinction, the first half of the chapter provides a *descriptive* account of Buddhist views drawing mainly on early sources. For reasons of space, our attention is focused here mostly on India and southeast Asia, and we are unable to consider developments in China, Japan, or East Asia. The second half of the chapter explores *normative* questions, such as what the Buddhist attitude to politics *should* be and whether traditional Buddhist ideas any longer have a place in the modern world.

Politics in the Buddha's day

The Buddha lived at a time of rapid social change. The Pali Canon describes the political geography of northeast India as consisting of sixteen states (*mahājanapada*), some of the most important of which were Aṅga, Magadha, Kāsi, Kosala, and Vajji (AN i.212f). Within these states an older tribal form of organization was giving way to new forms of government of two main kinds: clan collectives (*gaṇa-saṅgha*), and kingdoms. The inhabitants of Vajji, the last state just mentioned, provide an example of a clan collective. By absorbing neighbouring tribes, the Vajjis gradually expanded into a confederacy consisting of eight clans with numerous chieftains. By contrast, Magadha, one of the other important states, evolved into a powerful kingdom under the control of a single hereditary ruler. The kingdom of Magadha would lay the foundations for the Mauryan empire over which Aśoka, the most famous Buddhist king of all time, would rule a few centuries later.

In geographical terms, the clan collectives (*gaṇa-saṅgha*) tended to be located in hilly and less fertile areas around the periphery of the kingdoms. The Buddha came from a *gaṇa-saṅgha* known as the Sakyas, who were vassals of king Pasenadi of Kosala. The Sakyas administered their affairs through periodic assemblies led by the elected leader of the clan (a non-hereditary position). This political system could be described as oligarchic or republican. Most of the clans claimed *khattiya* (warrior) status, but there is little evidence that the caste system played an important role at this time. Only two social classes are in evidence: the *khattiyas*, who held influential positions in the clans, and the *dāsa-kammakāras* (slaves and labourers), who enjoyed few, if any, rights.

One of the Buddha's most famous rivals—Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism—also came from a *gaṇa-saṅgha*. That these communities produced such distinctive heterodox teachers gives some reason to think they were less willing to accept orthodox ideas. One notable departure from orthodoxy on the part of the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s was the rejection of Brahmanical teachings about the origin of the state. The Brahmins taught that the king was the divinely appointed protector of the people, whereas the Buddhists, as we will see below, offered an alternative account of the origins of the state, either as kingship validated by Dhamma or as a social contract between the king and his subjects.

During the Buddha's lifetime many of the *gaṇa-saṅgha*s were in the process of evolving into kingdoms. Clan chiefs began to reinvent themselves as kings and establish hereditary dynasties. As this happened, the administration of the states became increasingly centralized. Cabinets of ministers and counsellors were formed to advise the king on state affairs, and Brahmin priests were employed to consecrate the king and perform public ceremonies. As states became more powerful their relations with their neighbours often became fractious. Conflicts leading to the annexation of neighbouring territory were

frequent, and within a few centuries only four of the original sixteen states remained. These were the three kingdoms of Kāsi, Kosala, and Magadha, and the *gaṇa-saṅgha* oligarchy of the Vajji republic.

These four states contended for political pre-eminence until Magadha emerged as pre-eminent. Its first king, Bimbisāra, expanded the frontiers of his state before being murdered by his son Ajātasattu, who continued his father's campaign of military conquest from his capital at Rājagaha. This city would later become the Mauryan capital of Pāṭaliputta. Before then, Ajātasattu would annexe the adjacent kingdom of Kosala and wage a long campaign of attrition against the Vajjis for control of the river trade on the Ganges. On one occasion when contemplating an attack on the Vajjis, Ajātasattu sought the advice of the Buddha on how to defeat his opponents (we will consider the Buddha's reply below). Eventually, Magadha prevailed and the victory of monarchy over republicanism in the Ganges plain was complete.

Early sources on politics

So much for the historical background, much of which is provided by Buddhist sources. Important early texts with a bearing on politics include the *Mahāsudassana Sutta,* the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta,* the *Aggañña Sutta*, part of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta,* and various *Jātakas*. We will summarise the key teachings of these texts below.

The *Mahāsudassana Sutta* (DN 17) explains how a former king known as Mahāsudassana (the Buddha in a previous life) obtained the seven treasures of a *Cakkavatti* or 'wheel turning monarch' by pursuing a path of virtue. He ruled over eighty-four thousand cities and possessed seven treasures, namely the wheel treasure (a magical wheel which precedes the king on his peaceful conquest of neighbouring lands); the elephant treasure; the horse treasure; the jewel treasure; the woman treasure; the householder treasure; and the counsellor treasure. The *sutta* teaches that the *Cakkavatti* can only retain his status by ruling in an appropriate manner and encouraging his subjects to attain a state of moral purity.

Developing this theme, the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* (DN 26) narrates how one of the *Cakkavatti's* successors turns his back on traditional norms and begins to implement his own ideas. This led to the disappearance of his magical wheel and the subsequent decline of his kingdom. After a long period of decline, the people emerge from hiding and things slowly begin to improve as righteous conduct returned. The Buddha predicts that this cycle of improvement will continue and that a new *Cakkavatti* will arise in future along with a new Buddha called Metteya.

This narrative is generally recognized as containing an innovative political theory—sometimes referred to as 'the two wheels of Dhamma'—in recognition of the symbiosis it depicts between the secular and sacred realms.

The *Cakkavatti* presides over the temporal realm and the Buddha over the spiritual realm. It is made clear, however, that the authority of the Buddha is greater than that of the *Cakkavatti*, thus sending the message that Church takes priority over State. As Friedlander notes, 'This notion of the two separate, but complementary, roles has contributed greatly towards the compatibility of Buddhist ideas on governance and modern Western conceptions of the separation between the church and state' (2009, 11).

A third *sutta*, the *Aggañña Sutta* (DN 27), is widely seen as a satire on Vedic origin myths that depict that caste system as having a divine origin in which Brahmins occupy the highest level. The *sutta* narrates a story of decline from an original utopian condition driven by increasing greed on the part of the world's first inhabitants. As public order deteriorates, the people draw up rules and agree to elect a king to enforce them. The king is known as Mahā-sammata, which means the 'Great Elect' or the 'People's Choice.' The institution of kingship is thus depicted as a classic 'social contract' arrangement between ruler and ruled. A variety of Buddhist kings in Myanmar and Sri Lanka subsequently claimed descent from the legendary Mahā-sammata.

Reflecting on these texts, we notice that the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* tells a rather different story about the origin of government to the *Aggañña Sutta*. In the *Aggañña Sutta,* the king's authority derives from the consent of the people, and subsequent kings inherit that initial consent. In the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta*, by contrast, the king's legitimacy is underpinned by his personal virtue as witnessed by the thirty-two marks on his body. How do we explain this discrepancy between the texts? One suggestion is that the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* represents an attempt by the *saṅgha* to benefit from state patronage by portraying kings in a flattering light (as perfectly virtuous). However, the explanation may simply be that the texts are describing different societies, or the same society at different stages of development. We have already noted that both republics and kingdoms existed in the Buddha's day, and it may be that each *sutta* has a different model in mind.

As the son of a political family, the Buddha was shrewd enough to realise that in the unstable times in which he lived the security of the *saṅgha* could only be assured with political support. He therefore sought to maintain good relations between *saṅgha* and state by introducing various rules to avoid friction with the civil authorities. He forbade the ordination of escaped criminals, debtors, slaves, and deserters from the king's army, and sought to avoid the kind of family ruptures that occur when children seek ordination without the consent of their parents, or wives without the permission of their husbands. Clearly, the Buddha did not wish the *saṅgha* to be seen as a disruptive force. His general policy seems to have been for the *saṅgha* to remain aloof from social and political controversy.

Despite this policy, the Buddha was occasionally approached by kings and civil dignitaries for advice on questions of social policy. One such occasion, alluded to above, is narrated in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* when during the last few months of his life the Buddha was consulted by king Ajātasattu about his plans to attack his Vajji neighbours. The Buddha gave a qualified, diplomatic reply, apparently wishing to avoid antagonizing the king. He praised the Vajjis for practising a republican form of democracy and an equalitarian ethic and predicted success for them so long as they adhered to seven traditional practices, as listed below:

1. To hold frequent assemblies.
2. To assemble and adjourn in harmony.
3. Not to decree anything that has not been decreed or abolish anything that has already been decreed.
4. To honour, respect, esteem, and venerate the elders.
5. Not to abduct women and girls from their families.
6. To honour, respect, esteem, and venerate the traditional shrines.
7. To provide protection, shelter, and refuge for *arahant*s.

Here, the Buddha commends the holding of regular meetings to seek agreement on common concerns, respect for precedent and tradition, respect for women and girls and by extension family life, respect for religious sites and ceremonies, and support for awakened religious teachers. Unfortunately for the Vajjis, these exemplary practices were insufficient to save them from annexation by the kingdom of Magadha. Some see the Buddha's commendation of these practices as an indication that he favoured a republican form of government over monarchy. It should be noted, however, that this is the only place where he gives any clear indication of such a preference. Everywhere else in the Pali canon he gives the impression that monarchy is the default political institution. As we saw above, the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* clearly expresses the view that the best form of government is a monarchy headed by a spiritually advanced king.

The seven principles just mentioned were also adopted by the *saṅgha*, which was clearly organized on republican lines. We see this from the fact that the Buddha refused to appoint a successor, and decisions were taken in open assembly with each monk having an equal right to make proposals and vote. Observing the method by which the *saṅgha* takes decisions, some scholars have claimed that the Buddha invented democracy. Such, according to Bechert (1979, 7), was the view of Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933) and Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956). The *saṅgha*, however, was a private organization (an 'intentional society' as mentioned in the preceding chapter), and the *saṅgha*'s constitution does not appear to have been taken as a model for society in India or any other part of Asia. Nor does it follow, of course, that because the Buddha organized the *saṅgha* along republican lines he believed a similar constitutional arrangement would be appropriate for lay society.

The ten virtues of a king

Turning now to the *Jātaka*s, we find they provide a basic ethical framework for Buddhist rulers in the form of the 'Ten Virtues of a King' (*dasa rājadhamma*). The list of ten items is found in the *Mahāhaṃsa Jātaka* (534) and *Mahāsutasoma Jātaka* (537). As summarised by Walpola Rahula (1974, 85) the ten virtues are:

1. *Dāna*: liberality, generosity, charity. He (the king) should not have craving and attachment for wealth and property and should give it away for the welfare of the people.
2. *Sīla*: a high and moral character. He should never destroy life, cheat, steal and exploit others, commit adultery, utter falsehood, or take intoxicating drinks.
3 *Pariccāga*: sacrificing everything for the good of the people. He must be prepared to give up all personal comfort, name and fame, and even his life, in the interest of the people.
4. *Ajjava*: honesty and integrity. He must be free from fear and favour in the discharge of his duties, must be sincere in his intentions, and must not deceive the public.
5. *Maddava*: kindness and gentleness. He must possess a genial temperament.
6. *Tapa*: austerity of habits. He must lead a simple life and should not indulge in a life of luxury. He must have self-control.
7. *Akkodha*: freedom from envy, ill-will, enmity. He should bear no grudge against anybody.
8. *Avihiṃsā*: non-violence, which means not only that he should harm nobody, but that he should try to promote peace by avoiding and preventing war, and everything which involves violence and destruction of life.
9. *Khanti*: patience, forbearance, tolerance, understanding. He must be able to bear hardships, difficulties, and insults without losing his temper.
10. *Avirodha*: non-opposition, non-obstruction. He should not oppose the will of the people or obstruct any measures that are conducive to the welfare of the people. In other words, he should rule in harmony with his people.

These ten virtues are the qualities that equip a person for high office. We could sum them up by saying that a ruler should be a person of integrity, of moderate habits, statesmanlike in conduct, tolerant, even-tempered, and inspired by a desire for public service. As is typical of the Buddhist approach, the list emphasizes virtues rather than rules or principles. The list, indeed, gives few clues as to the policies that should feature in a *dhammarāja*'s manifesto. There appear to be only three: respect for the will of the people; concern for the welfare of the people; and the promotion of peace.

While these policy aims are general, they have certain logical implications. To respect the will of the people the king must first discover what that will is. This requires some form of political representation through which popular sentiment can be expressed. The welfare of the people likewise presupposes a viable economic infrastructure. The promotion of peace also requires social institutions established to safeguard peace against threats from within and without. Questions of this last kind are normally regarded as matters

of 'state security.' To transpose the list of ten guiding principles for those in government into a modern idiom we might speak of the *dhammarāja* as having an obligation to implement sound policies on welfare, the economy, and security. He should also be of good character and ensure a fair system of political representation.

The term *dhammarāja* literally means a '*dhamma* king,' or 'a king who rules according to *dhamma*.' *Dhammarāja* and *cakkavatti* ('universal ruler') appear to be broadly synonymous terms based on the canonical gloss of the term *cakkavatti* as '*dhammarāja*' (AN i.109). Many historical rulers were honoured with one or other of these titles. There are also numerous stories about *dhammarāja*s in the *Jātakas*. Bechert (1979: 6) suggests the notion of the *dhammarāja* was a product of cultural syncretism, being the Buddhist version of the Hindu *devarāja* (divine king). According to Yoshinori, 'it was often difficult to distinguish a *dhammarāja* from a *devarāja*' because 'Theravada monarchs who espoused the *dhammarāja* ideal still kept the Hindu-Brahmanical court establishment of soothsayers, fortune tellers, astrologers, and court ritualists' (1980, 83). Such rulers would perform elaborate state rituals to secure the prosperity of their kingdoms, and there are also specific chants (*paritta*) a king can recite to avert specific natural disasters like floods, disease, and loss of animals and crops. While today no *dhammarāja*s exercise political power, the late King Bhumibhol Adulyadej (1927-2016) of Thailand undertook explicitly in his coronation speech in 1956 to rule in the spirit of a *dhammarāja.*

Aśoka

There is insufficient space here to review the exploits of the many Buddhist kings who have left their mark on the pages of history, kings like Duṭṭhagāmaṇī (r.161–137 BCE) in Sri Lanka or Ram Khamhaeng (r.1279–1298 CE) in Thailand. However, we cannot move on without saying something about the archetypal *dhammarāja*, Aśoka Maurya (274–236 BCE). As Friedlander observes, 'In the eyes of most Asian Buddhists Aśoka has become the critical figure in defining the relationship between Buddhism and politics as he is now seen as having been not only the first legendary Buddhist emperor, but also the first historical ruler of a Buddhist state' (2009, 14).

Aśoka inherited the empire founded by his grandfather, Candragupta Maurya. In the early years of his reign, Aśoka continued the Mauryan policy of expansion and extended the empire almost to the limits the British Empire would reach at its height. In the course of this expansion, Aśoka led a brutal assault on the region of Kāliṅga, in modern day Orissa. This led to great destruction and loss of life, which provoked dismay and contrition in the king. Aśoka underwent a change of heart and began to put his faith in 'Dhamma' rather than conflict.

Aśoka ordered edicts to be carved on rocks and pillars throughout his empire. As Aśoka uses the term 'Dhamma' in these proclamations, it means not exclusively Buddhist teachings but a set of core moral values that transcend the dogmas of any one faith. While apparently personally committed to Buddhism, he warns in his twelfth Rock Edict against privileging one's own faith over that of others. Aśoka tells us in his fifth Rock Edict that his officers of Dhamma 'are busy in all sects, establishing Dhamma . . . among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharans . . . and other peoples on the Western frontier.' He adds, 'They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dhamma.' Aśoka speaks of his 'Dhamma regulations' and 'Dhamma proclamations,' and mentions that civil servants known as *dhamma mahāmātra*s were employed to proclaim and enforce his principles of good government throughout the empire. Aśoka also went on pilgrimages to places associated with the Buddha's life and ordered relics of the Buddha to be housed in domes known as *stūpa*s that would mark holy sites.

In what did Aśoka's Dhamma consist? He answers this question in his second Pillar Edict. 'Dhamma,' he tells us '(involves) little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness and purity.' He expands on this in Rock Edict 11, adding that Dhamma consists in 'proper behaviour towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings.' While Aśoka does not set out an explicit theory of government or politics, it is difficult to escape the impression that he saw it as his mission to promote a universal code of values for humanity. Is there any connection between the moral values of Aśoka and those of the modern world? Some suggest a connection can be found in the contemporary ideal of universal human rights as set out, for example, in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948 and similar conventions (see Chapter 6). While more precisely formulated, these declarations express the same values of tolerance and respect for human dignity that we find in Aśoka's edicts. As one contemporary writer on human rights has noted:

> The Edicts of Aśoka address wide-ranging issues related to concepts of justice and human rights. They speak directly about compassion, social welfare, and equal protection under the law regardless of political belief or caste, respect for all life, environmental protection, humanitarian assistance for those who suffer, humane treatment of employees and servants, the hearing of petitions and the administration of justice; the banning of slavery, the right to be free from 'harsh or cruel' punishment, and the possibility of amnesty from the death penalty. (Lauren 2013, 171)

It is clear that by the time of Aśoka, Buddhism had been drawn into deeper involvement in political life. The Buddha spread his teaching so successfully that lay followers flocked to his movement, and the lives of the laity are intimately bound up with social, economic, and political concerns. These concerns could not simply be ignored. Apart from any personal

commitments, kings like Aśoka began to patronise Buddhism because they could see that the Buddha's teachings promoted social stability which in turn ensured prosperity for the state. As every politician knows, furthermore, the support of an influential religious group can be invaluable. The epithet of 'just and righteous king' (*dhammiko dhammarāja*) when bestowed by the *saṅgha* would be a welcome endorsement for any ruler and serve to enhance his power and status. Later, the term 'bodhisattva king' (*bodhisattva rāja*) was also used, usually implying that the holder of the title was not only a king but an incarnation of the future Buddha Metteya. Aśoka's deeds, and legends about him, were retold in texts like the *Aśokāvadāna*, the *Mahāvaṃsa*, and other chronicles in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. In later centuries, many kings in southeast Asia modelled themselves on Aśoka as patrons of Buddhism.

Politics east and west

Following the above descriptive review, we now turn to a consideration of normative issues. An initial observation is that in comparison with the West, there is a surprising dearth of normative political literature in Buddhism. Various commentators have expressed puzzlement on this point. As Saddhatissa notes:

> It might have been expected that, with the attention given to the conduct of the laity and the frequency of his advice in social matters, the Buddha would at some time have sketched the political construction of an ideal state: yet no thought of any reform in the existing political set-up is apparent . . . It seems that he attributed the success of a system to the morals of the people working it rather than to any virtue inherent in the system itself. (1987, 135)

Winston King notes that 'Buddhism took the monarchical form of secular society that it found in India for granted and was not concerned enough to worry about changing it.' He accepts that 'there are some passages dealing with the duties of kings' but observes 'significantly most of these are found in the *Jātaka* Tales, not in the classic *sutta*s' (2001, 164). In this respect, Buddhism contrasts sharply with the Western interest in politics. King notes that Buddhism 'has scarcely moved consciously toward social or political definition until very recently' (2001, 167), whereas 'the West has been theorizing and experimenting in sociopolitical matters, both in a secular and religious way, ever since the days of Plato' (2001, 163). King here alludes to the role of religion, and mention must be made of the role of Christianity in promoting its 'social gospel.' As we noted in the previous chapter, some believe that engaged Buddhism arose in part as a reaction to Christian missionary work.

We noted above that the Buddha was by no means silent on social issues. Nevertheless, there was very little development of what Aristotle calls 'the philosophy of human affairs,' or political science. What we find instead are moral teachings like the 'Ten Virtues of a King' mentioned above. Aristotle and Plato, by contrast, saw the state as a large and powerful educative agency that

gives the individual increased opportunities for self-development and greater capacities for the enjoyment of life. Thus, common in the Western tradition is the idea that participation in government is pragmatically necessary, morally obligatory, and/or the only path to full development of one's capabilities. We see this belief restated in modern times in Marx's assertion that human beings can only achieve their full potential through active participation in a democratic and egalitarian society (Moore 2016, 136). As Moore observes, 'Western political thought is profoundly committed to the importance of politics to human life. Even the anarchists, in vehemently denying the *value* of politics, inadvertently admit its tremendous *importance*' (2016, 3 original emphasis).

Why is Buddhism apparently so uninterested in political science? We can suggest five possible reasons. The first concerns the Buddha's own example. The Buddha was born into a noble family but dramatically renounced a career in political life in favour of a life free from any such entanglements. Bechert suggests that political neutrality was essential for his chosen lifestyle:

> It is easy to understand why the early Buddhist community was conceived as a strictly non-political religious movement. Any entanglement of the *saṅgha* in worldly affairs would have contravened the main goal of the religious life itself, viz. reaching *nibbāna*. At the same time, the then prevailing political order in Northern India made it advisable for all ascetic groups to avoid any misunderstandings as to their political neutrality, because there existed no continuous political authority, but various rather small and often instable states only at that time. (1979, 2)

A second reason may be that the intellectual energy of these ascetically-minded religious seekers was focused on transcendent subjects as opposed to mundane matters. Buddhist intellectuals have directed their attention primarily to metaphysics, leaving topics of more general concern to be addressed in popular literature like the *Jātaka*s and *Avadāna*s. These sources narrate incidents from previous lives of the Buddha, and in many of these he is himself born into a ruling family or has dealings with political figures. As Lewis notes, these stories were translated into various vernacular languages and were used as precedents in the legal systems of southeast Asia (2003, 235).

> In many of the story narratives describing the dilemmas of rule, the recurring message is that political power should be wielded as a means of creating a society where compassion flourishes. Holding political power is not just an end, the coronation of one's past good karma, but the means to an end: shaping the world with justice and kindness. (2003, 242)

Clearly, the message of these sources was that kings should seek the well-being of their subjects. However, the deeper question of whether this task is best left to kings or whether some alternative political system is better equipped to fulfil this aim is not explored. From the earliest times Buddhists were aware

that rival systems of government were available, like the *gaṇa-sangha*s and kingdoms we discussed above. There was little critical reflection, however, on the relative merits of these systems or consideration of alternatives.

A third explanation may be that in the West interest in politics grew out of the development of democracy, and although democracy did not endure for more than a few centuries in ancient Greece it was perhaps long enough to stimulate comparison with alternative political systems (such as the despotism of neighbouring Persia) and provoke debate on their respective merits.

Above, we alluded to the blurring of the boundaries in southeast Asia between the Buddhist *dhammarāja* and the Hindu *devarāja*. This may be a fourth reason why, as Lewis notes, 'later Buddhist theorists did not develop many finely nuanced policies for wielding political power' (2003, 250). Lewis explains as follows:

> In fact, across the Himalayan, Sri Lankan, and Southeast Asian frontiers of India, where Buddhism spread and established its network of institutions, it was accompanied by Hindu and Brahmanical traditions at the ruling courts. Thus, Hindu theories of divine kingship, rule by force, and royal court ritualism at times influenced these otherwise predominantly Buddhist polities. The history of these frontier countries—up to the present—therefore cannot be viewed as being influenced solely by the Buddhist theories of political rule but by the confluence of these two Indic traditions' (2003, 250).

The suggestion here is that rather than develop its own traditions, institutions, and political theories Buddhism found it more convenient to adopt those of Hinduism, with minor modifications.

A fifth and final suggestion is that as Buddhism moved beyond India it found little incentive to develop a political philosophy of its own due to the situation of the societies it encountered. When Buddhism reached China in the first century of the Christian era, it encountered a strong social order already in place. Confucianism was authoritative in matters of social conduct and Buddhism could not compete as a rival in this field. Instead, it found a niche for itself as the third of the 'three religions' and offered its expertise in metaphysics, a field in which Confucianism and Taoism were weaker.

In Tibet, on the other hand, where Buddhism encountered an unsophisticated feudal society, it quickly established itself as the dominant ideology and had no need to expand its traditional philosophical base, at least for many centuries. Obviously, the story in each region of Asia will be different, but it remains the case that Buddhist political ideas changed little over time, and kingship is routinely presented as the default political institution. As Moore notes: 'Although the several traditions disagree about doctrine, history, and the authority of various texts and teachers, they maintained remarkably similar

ideas about political theory, largely preserving the theory of the enlightened monarch (*cakkavatti*) developed in early Buddhism, while modifying it in similar ways' (2016, 32).

The thoughts on political theory Moore refers to here are found in a genre of literature that goes by the name of *nītiśāstra*, a term meaning something like 'treatises on statecraft' or 'works on political ethics.' These treatises are the closest we come to a discussion of politics. These works were composed by Buddhist philosophers seeking to advise kings on how to rule in accordance with Buddhist principles. An example of one such text is Nāgārjuna's *Suhṛllekha* (Letter to a Friend). This is a short text of 123 verses couched in the form a letter written by Nāgārjuna to king Gautamīputra, a south Indian monarch of his acquaintance. Several chapters of the work speak of the king's obligation to rule justly, and the text also provides general recommendations on political matters. This work had wide influence and was translated into Chinese and Tibetan. Another work by Nāgārjuna is the *Ratnāvalī* (Precious Garland), which admonishes kings to rule according to the principles of *rājadhamma* and promises them worldly success in return. Other influential Mahāyāna texts with a bearing on politics include the *Ārya-satyaka-parivarta* or *Ārya-bodhisattva-gocara* (The Range of the Bodhisattva), Āryadeva's *Catuḥśataka* (the Four Hundred Stanzas), and the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* (*Sūtra* Of Golden Light). Short summaries of these texts are provided by Moore (2016, 31–43).

Many centuries later a substantial work on statecraft was composed by the Tibetan scholar Mipham (1846-1912). Mipham's *A Treatise on Ethics for Kings: An Ornament for Rulers* is described by its translator José Cabezón as 'one of the longest classical works on the theory and practice of Buddhist kingship ever written in any Buddhist language' (Mipham 2017, 243). The work was composed in 1895, and Mipham's late date gives him a perspective from which to survey the preceding two millennia of Buddhist reflection on statecraft. He begins by affirming that the primary task of the sovereign is to care for the common good, stating 'the true king is the one who properly reflects on how to bring happiness to his subjects' (2017, 8). In accordance with the 'two wheels of Dhamma' theory, Mipham believed that church and state should be mutually supportive and envisaged a positive role for politics in supporting spiritual practice: 'Righteous nations,' he observes, 'are stairways that take you to heaven' (2017, 181). Mipham clearly inclined to an 'engaged' understanding of Buddhism.

As is common, Mipham takes kingship as the default political institution and says nothing about alternative systems of government. There was, however, an unusual system of government in existence in Mipham's day, and in Chapter 13 he makes a passing reference to the 'joint system,' this being the dyarchy of religious and temporal rule that reached its culmination in the Gelugpa consolidation of power under the fifth Dalai Lama in 1642. This arrangement,

known as the Ganden Phodrang, was thought of as the union of Buddhism and politics. The two domains of church and state were spoken of as 'conjoined' (*zung ´brel*) 'like sun and moon' (*nyi zla ltar*). Mipham, however, does not appear to regard this distinctive constitutional arrangement as exceptional, and his treatise proceeds along conventional lines in providing an account of the virtues and duties pertinent to royal office in the manner of the Ten Virtues of a King.

Modernity

Mention of Mipham brings us down to the modern period. The middle of the nineteenth century marked a watershed in Buddhist political theory. Under the influence of globalization, colonization, and secularization, traditional ideas were comprehensively replaced by new ideas drawn from the West. As Moore points out, 'For 2,000 years, everyone agreed that Buddhist politics meant monarchy, and over the course of 100 years, everyone changed their minds, at least officially.' Thus it was that 'Over the course of 100 years, between 1850 and 1950, every Buddhist-majority country went from openly embracing monarchy to openly embracing republican government (with the exception of Tibet)' (Moore 2016, 4). A few countries (Bhutan, Thailand, and Cambodia) chose to establish constitutional monarchies. A short summary of the contemporary political situation of Buddhism in China, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia, India, and Western countries is provided by Friedlander (2009), together with a bibliography of print and online resources, and a more detailed review is available in Harris (1999, 1–25).

The upshot of this rapid pace of change is that the traditional political model has been shaken and many Buddhist nations left rudderless. As Lewis writes:

> Because most of the discourses and prescriptions for political action in Buddhist societies are based upon the presence and necessary intervention of a king, Buddhist societies have faced the unprecedented challenges of colonialism—and now independence—lacking the guidance of primary resources from their canonical tradition. Across Asia, there has been an urgently felt need to redefine the political foundations of Buddhism in a kingless world. The rise of lay organizations across Asia and the general decline of monastics and monastic influences have dramatically changed the classical balances imagined in the early texts. (2003, 251)

Heinz Bechert describes this new historical phase as 'Buddhist modernism,' a term we encountered in the last chapter. Modernism holds that the ancient teachings are out of date and need to be modified to meet contemporary needs. Some modernists believe that the inadequacy of traditional teachings in the post-colonial period left a political vacuum that played a part in the problems that affected and continue to affect southeast Asia, such as the incursion of communism and the rise of military dictatorships in countries like Myanmar. Accordingly, they claim the Buddhist political theory that existed prior to 1850 is no longer fit for purpose in a democratic age.

In contrast to the modernist view, some commentators seek to emphasize the link with the past and sees modern republicanism as more of an evolution rather than a rejection of the classical model. Writers like Joanna Macy (1979) and Trevor Ling (1983) believe the Buddha was a republican at heart and see his advice to the Vajjis as revealing his core political belief. On this interpretation, the Buddha tolerated monarchy for pragmatic reasons rather than from a philosophical commitment to rule by kings. Richard Gard shares a similar view, noting 'Early Indian Buddhist political thought would seem appropriate for modern constitutional monarchies and parliamentary and presidential governments in Buddhist Asia' (Moore 2016, 46). Which of these interpretations is correct? There is some truth to both, but after a review of the experience of modernity in Buddhist countries, Moore concludes 'While there are textual and historical bases for a republican or democratic interpretation of Buddhist political theory, we cannot simply flatly assert that Buddhism is fundamentally democratic, nor forget its long embrace of monarchy' (2016, 61).

Limited citizenship

Moore proposes a middle way between the modernists and their opponents, arguing that the normative idea about government in the Pāli Canon amounts to a theory of 'limited citizenship.' The concept of limited citizenship in the West derives from the writings of thinkers like Epicurus (314–270 BCE), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (1927–1997), and Methodist Stanley Hauerwas (b. 1940). The ideal has been a respected—if minority—political stance for centuries. The theory might be summed up as follows:

> The primary goal of politics is to ensure social stability and peace by promulgating laws and rules, punishing violations, and preventing extreme poverty (which typically leads to crime). Politics is a useful and inescapable human activity since some human beings will inevitably seek to benefit at other people's expense through theft, violence, and fraud, and the victims of those actions will seek to create laws and institutions to protect themselves. However, individuals have no moral duty to participate in politics, and one should participate only to the extent that doing so helps one make spiritual progress. Typically, active participation beyond merely obeying the laws and paying taxes will be a distraction from the more important goal of individual salvation. (Moore 2016, 29)

The idea here is that politics is necessary but ultimately of minor importance. As applied to Buddhism, it means that politics has instrumental value as a means of assisting people to reach nirvana, but that only nirvana has intrinsic value. In a society of awakened beings there would be no need for laws, judges, courts, or police, but as we move towards this goal such worldly institutions are a regrettable necessity. While some form of government is required, however, the form it takes is not of great importance. Furthermore,

it is advisable for individuals to steer clear of involvement in politics if at all possible, since time spent on such matters is a distraction from what has real value, namely spiritual development. Indeed, the best way to change society is to put one's efforts into practising the Dhamma. Moore's conclusion about the place of politics in Buddhism is as follows:

> Buddhism is radically deflationary about the importance of politics to human life, coming about as close as possible to being overtly antipolitical without actually embracing anarchism. On the Buddhist view, politics is inevitable and is probably even necessary and helpful, but it is also a tremendous waste of time and effort, as well as being a prime temptation to allow ego to run rampant. Buddhist political theory denies that people have a moral duty to engage in politics except to a very minimal degree (pay the taxes, obey the laws, maybe vote in the elections), and it actively portrays engagement in politics and the pursuit of enlightenment as being conflicting paths in life. (2016, 2)

At bottom, the question is about the relevance of politics to soteriology. Is politics integral to soteriology, such that individual transformation is significantly affected by the political system under which one lives? Or is politics of secondary importance, such that it has a relatively small or even negligible effect on personal spiritual progress? If so, it may be, as Buddhism generally claims, that the quality of government and social policies *follows* from the goodness of the people, rather than leads it.

Conclusion

At the start of the chapter, we divided the literature on politics into two categories: descriptive and normative. The first half of the chapter described the historical background to the political situation of north India in the Buddha's time; the traditional teachings as found in sources like the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta* and the *Aggañña Sutta*; the exemplary reign of a great Buddhism monarch, Aśoka; and the Ten Virtues of a King. The second half of the chapter addressed normative issues revolving around three basic questions. The first is whether early Buddhism contains a theory of government. The second is whether the texts support monarchy, republicanism, or something else. The third concerns the significance Buddhist attaches to politics overall. In response to the first question, it seems there is indeed a Buddhist theory of government, as we see from the early sources we reviewed. The *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda* endorses enlightened kingship, while the *Aggañña Sutta* commends a republican social contract model. Responding to the second question, it appears the ideal form of Buddhist government would be a form of enlightened kingship based on a social contract between ruler and ruled. There is nothing original about this as a theory of government, and many Western writers including Plato, Hobbes, and Burke, have commended an arrangement along similar lines. Regarding the third question, the answer Moore offers is that for Buddhism politics is secondary to the pursuit of individual awakening 'and

to some degree actually irrelevant' (2016, 16). Not all scholars, of course, share this view, as we noted above. The Thai scholar-monk Buddhadasa (1906–1993), for example, is reported to have said 'Politics is dhamma and dhamma is politics' (quoted in Friedlander 2009, 17). These contrasting opinions mirror the disagreement between engaged and disengaged Buddhism discussed in the preceding chapter.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- In contrast to Greek thinkers, Buddhist philosophers showed little interest in political science. The sources do not debate the merits of different political systems or recommend activism or revolution as a method of securing political change. The focus is on improving society gradually through change at a personal as opposed to institutional level.
- Buddhist sources assume that monarchy is the default political institution and confine themselves to offering advice to kings on how to rule humanely. The monarch is encouraged to practise the 'Ten Virtues of a King' (*dasa rājadhamma*) and the role of the *saṅgha* is to advise the king so that he adopts policies in accordance with the Dhamma.
- Important early sources include the *Aggañña Sutta,* the *Cakkavatti-sīhanāda Sutta,* the *Mahāsudassana Sutta,* the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta,* and various *Jātakas*. Influential Mahāyāna texts with a bearing on politics include the *Ārya-satyaka-parivarta* or *Ārya-bodhisattva-gocara* (The Range of the Bodhisattva), Nāgārjuna's *Suhṛllekha* (Letter to a Friend) and *Ratnāvalī* (Precious Garland), Āryadeva's *Catuḥśataka* (Four Hundred Stanzas), the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* (*Sūtra* Of Golden Light), and Mipham's *A Treatise on Ethics for Kings: An Ornament for Rulers*.
- The secular and the spiritual are depicted in early sources as two distinct, but complementary realms known as the 'two wheels of Dhamma.' Thus, it can be said that Buddhism has always had a political dimension. There is disagreement, however, about the scope of this dimension. 'Engaged' and 'disengaged' Buddhists hold opposing views on how closely Buddhists should be involved in politics.
- Aśoka is seen as the archetypal *dhammarāja*, and many historical monarchs have sought to model themselves on his example.
- As regards the preferred political system, attempts have been made to portray Buddhism as favouring democracy, socialism, and communism. The most recent characterization is by Moore who sees Buddhism as promoting a form of 'limited citizenship' in which Buddhists are encouraged to remain on the margins of any political system.

Discussion questions

1. Was Buddhadasa correct to say that 'politics is dhamma and dhamma is politics'?
2. Why has Buddhism shown comparatively little interest in political science?
3. Should Buddhists remain 'disengaged' from politics?
4. Does any contemporary political leader you can think of come close to embodying the 'Ten Virtues of a King'?
5. Which is more important: the personal virtue of politicians, or the political system they work under?
6. Is Buddhism compatible with Marxism?
7. Describe the role of Buddhism in the politics of any one Asian country in the twentieth century.

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Chapter Four
Violence

In this chapter

At first sight, the Buddhist position on violence appears clear cut. Many texts proclaim that all violence is wrong, leading logically to a position of pacifism. However, this position has problematic implications. For example, Buddhism clearly believes in good government, but how will a government enforce its laws? The survival and practice of Buddhism itself appears to require a stable society, and it is difficult to see how this can be achieved without the physical coercion of criminals. Beyond the need for security inside its borders, a state must also counter threats from outside such as terrorist attacks or hostile actions by enemy states. To repel such threats an army and police force seem necessary. Following this line of reasoning, however, leads us to a position directly contrary to the pacifism of the early sources. How is this dilemma to be resolved? Buddhist thinkers have not addressed this problem systematically. The closest they come is in the advice on statecraft provided to kings in the *nītiśāstra* tradition mentioned in the last chapter. It seems that a theory of 'just war' is needed to provide the criteria to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of force.

Introduction

As the pioneering work of scholars like Michael Jerryson has shown, the claim of Buddhism to be a religion of peace is not sustainable. Jerryson speaks of his and other work in the field as 'disrupting the social imaginary that holds Buddhist traditions to be exclusively pacifist and exotic' (2010, 3). Sustained challenges to this imaginary have highlighted a familiar problematic that Stephen Jenkins describes in the following terms:

> Buddhist military and punitive violence, which has historically been a consistent feature of its polities, often including monastic communities, appears to be radically and inexplicably inconsistent with the values expressed by its scriptures and inspirational figures. (2010, 300)

Jerryson refers to this as 'the quandary of Buddhism and violence' (2018). Steven Collins believes the quandary is unresolvable because 'the contradiction between violence and non-violence is logically unavoidable' (1998, 422). Collins sees the aporia as evidence of two subsisting 'modes of Dhamma' in Buddhism, one mode prohibiting violence and the other permitting it. We will return to Collins's theory in the conclusion.

Michael Zimmerman identifies three stances that Theravāda and Mahāyāna texts adopt towards military and punitive violence. The first simply 'avoids a realistic discussion' by taking as its paradigm of kingship the mythical ideal ruler or *Cakkavatti* whose realm is always at peace and so recourse to violence is never required (2006, 217). The second, described as 'ethically fundamentalist,' holds that 'the throne of a king can only lead to hell' because of the king's duty to administer punishment, which is seen as a violation of Buddhist ethics (2006, 218). The implication here is that 'Only a fool becomes a king,' as the title of Zimmerman's article aptly expresses it.

The third response is a 'pragmatic' conception that depicts kingship in a more positive light and accepts the use of coercive force by a virtuous and compassionate sovereign. Sources advocating this position, however, do not explain *why* the sovereign's virtue justifies violence. One might think a virtuous and compassionate sovereign would be *more* scrupulous in avoiding violence rather than less. The dilemma is only heightened by Buddhism's emphasis on compassion. As Bernard Faure observes, 'Because Buddhists have made compassion their trademark, their complicated (and at times, disingenuous) relation with violence has raised more questions than in the case of followers of other religions' (2010, 223).

Classical sources on war

Classical Buddhist teachings strongly oppose the use of violence, analysing it as the product of greed (*rāga*), hatred (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*). The false belief in a self (*ātman*) and a desire to protect that self against 'others' who are thought to threaten it is seen as an underlying cause of aggression. Buddhism holds that drawing a sharp boundary between self and others leads to the construction of a self-image that sees all that is not of 'me and mine' (such as those of another country, race, or creed) as alien and threatening.

When this strong sense of self is reduced by practising Buddhist teachings, such egocentric preoccupations are thought to subside and be replaced by a greater appreciation of the kinship among beings. This dissipates the fear and hostility which engender conflict and so removes one of the main causes of violent disputes. When threatened, Buddhists are encouraged to practise patience (*khanti*), and there are many stories of exemplary patience as well as practices designed to cultivate toleration and forbearance. Anger is seen as a negative emotion that serves only to inflame situations and inevitably rebounds with negative karmic consequences.

Early Buddhist literature contains numerous references to war. The view expressed almost unanimously in the texts is that since war involves killing, and killing is a breach of the first precept, it is morally wrong to fight in either offensive or defensive wars. In marked contrast to the teachings of the Qur'an, the Buddha states (SN iv.308–11) that warriors who die in battle go not to heaven but to a special hell, since at the moment of death their

minds are intent on killing living beings. The fourth-century commentator Vasubandhu in his *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* expresses the view that even a conscript is guilty of killing unless he firmly resolves not to kill anyone even to save his own life. The same text affirms that killing is bad karma even in the case of self-defence or when defending friends.

A legend in the commentary to the *Dhammapada* (1.357f) narrates how the Buddha's kinsmen, the Sakyas, offered only token resistance when attacked by King Viḍūḍabha, and allowed themselves to be slaughtered rather than break the precept against taking life. The *Jātakas* contain stories of princes and kings who were so horrified by violence that they renounced their kingdoms to become ascetics or refused to defend themselves in the face of attack. The example of the Emperor Aśoka in the third century BCE is often given as the model for a Buddhist ruler.

As mentioned in the last chapter, after a bloody campaign in the thirteenth year of his reign, Aśoka renounced violence and vowed henceforth to rule by Dharma. The edicts promulgated throughout his empire speak of tolerance and compassion and state that conquest by Dharma is preferable to conquest by force or coercion. Aśoka modelled himself on the classical ideal of the *Cakkavatti*, the righteous Buddhist king. It is notable, however, that although the *Cakkavatti* is portrayed as conquering peacefully through the power of Dharma, he nonetheless retains his army and is accompanied by it on his travels to neighbouring kingdoms. Aśoka, likewise, did not disband his army or abjure the use of force.

In light of such anomalies Buddhist scholar Steven Collins has detected 'two modes' of Dharma in the canon with respect to violence, as noted at the start. In the first, 'the assessment of violence is context-dependent and negotiable', and in the second it is 'context-independent and non-negotiable'. The second mode represents the absolutist pacifist stance we have just been considering, while the first is based on the observation that on certain occasions the Buddha seems tacitly to allow—or at least does not explicitly condemn—the use of force by kings. As mentioned in the last chapter, an opportunity for him to do so occurred not long before his death when the warmongering King Ajātasattu sent his chief minister to the Buddha seeking advice on his plan to attack the neighbouring Vajjis (DN ii.72ff.). Instead of delivering a forthright condemnation of the planned attack (perhaps a politically difficult option given the royal patronage the *saṅgha* enjoyed) the Buddha simply commented obliquely on seven positive features of Vajji society.

Buddhism at war

The pacifist ideal of the classical sources has not prevented Buddhists throughout Asia fighting battles and conducting military campaigns from a mixture of political and religious motives. As Michael Jerryson notes, 'In countries such as Korea, Tibet, China, Japan, and Thailand, Buddhist

monasteries served as military outposts, monks led revolts, and Buddhist principles served as war rhetoric for heads of state' (2018, 254). Let us look a few examples, beginning with south Asia.

The early history of Sri Lanka was convulsed by war between Sinhalese and Tamils, and King Duṭṭhāgamaṇi (1st century BCE) is regarded as a national hero for defeating the Tamil general Eḷāra who had invaded the island from south India. Duṭṭhāgamaṇi's victory was glorified in a famous chronicle known as the *Mahāvaṃsa* (5th–6th centuries CE) which relates that his army was accompanied by Buddhist monks and that Buddhist relics adorned the spears of the soldiers. Monks disrobed and joined the army to fight in what the chronicle depicts as a 'holy war', although no such concept is legitimized in orthodox teachings. Despite this apparent endorsement by the *saṅgha*, after his victory Duṭṭhāgamaṇi (like Aśoka before him) felt remorse at the loss of life, whereupon, according to the chronicle, he was reassured by enlightened monks (*arahant*s) that he was responsible for the deaths of just 'one and a half people.' The meaning of this cryptic remark seems to be that in contrast to Buddhists, Tamils counted only as half persons, since they were 'evil men of wrong views' little better than 'beasts'.

In modern times, leading Sinhalese monks such as Walpola Rahula have spoken with approval of 'religio-nationalism' and described Duṭṭhāgāmaṇi's campaign as a 'crusade'. Contemporary supporters of Sinhalese nationalism include monks who believe that only the expulsion of non-Buddhist minorities from the country will bring a lasting peace. These monks have been inspired by an ideology known as 'Jathika Chintanaya' (nationalist thought) which expresses its values in the slogan 'Raṭa, Jātiya, Āgama' (country, race, and religion). Buddhist organizations expressing such nationalist sentiments include the Bodu Bala Sena (the army of Buddhist power). Human rights abuses were widespread in the Sri Lankan civil war, and although hostilities ceased in 2009, harassment, intimidation, torture, exploitation, and violence by Buddhists have continued, including attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities.

Buddhists were inevitably caught up in the turbulent history of southeast Asia in the twentieth century as Communist and Maoist movements fought for political power in Vietnam and Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge destroyed almost all of Cambodia's 3,600 Buddhist temples and reduced the number of monks from 50,000 to barely 3,000. The fear of Communist insurgency in Thailand led some monks to take a militant stand. In the 1970s the monk Kittivuḍḍho made several controversial public statements to the effect that killing Communists in defence of the Thai nation, Buddhism, and the monarchy was a religious duty that justified the suspension of the ordinary rules of morality. He compared Communism to the devil Māra and spoke of the killing of Communists as an act of great merit. In a speech to soldiers he offered a utilitarian justification for his views, stating that killing 5,000

Communists to ensure the happiness of 42 million Thais was legitimate. The role of the CIA in fomenting Buddhist opposition to Communism in this period has been detailed by Eugene Ford (2018).

Turning to north and east Asia we see again the involvement of monks in insurrections and military campaigns. This was most noticeable in Japan, where monasteries became wealthy land-owning institutions employing bands of warrior monks (*sōhei*) to provide protection and intimidate opponents. In the feudal conflicts of the medieval period, battles were fought between one sect and another and against military rulers (*shōgun*) and the imperial court. The teachings and practices of Zen Buddhism were found helpful by the military caste (*bushi*) as techniques to discipline the mind in battle and dispel the fear of death.

Martial arts such as swordsmanship and archery were influenced by Zen teachings, and the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) helped provide justification both for taking life and contemplating the loss of one's own life with equanimity. In the final analysis, so the reasoning of teachers such as Takuan Sōhō Zenji (1573–1645) went, there is only emptiness or the void: life is like a dream and the one who strikes and the one who is struck are merely phantoms. The Mahāyāna teaching of 'skilful means' was invoked to justify the taking of life and other prohibited acts; the principle invoked was that compassion requires bodhisattvas to break the rules when some greater good is at stake.

In the modern period, Buddhist religious groups have had a close involvement with Japanese nationalism and militarism. The Zen and Pure Land denominations provided financial support for the 1937–1945 war with China, and in World War II most Buddhist schools supported the Japanese war effort against the Allies. In his books such as *Zen at War*, Brian Victoria has exposed the extent to which many well-known Zen masters were enthusiastic advocates of war, to the surprise and embarrassment of their pacifist Western followers. The Zen master Harada Daiun Sōgaku (1871–1961) wrote, 'without plunging into the war arena, it is totally impossible to know the Buddha Dharma' (quoted in Victoria 2006, 137). In his second book *Zen War Stories*, Victoria cites more examples of Buddhist militarism in Japan. For example, Yasutani Haku'un (1885–1973), well known in the West as one of the founders of the Sanbō Kyōdan school, expressed the following view on the ethics of killing in war:

> Those who understand the spirit of the Mahāyāna precepts should be able to answer this question immediately. That is to say, of course one should kill, killing as many as possible. One should, fighting hard, kill everyone in the enemy army. The reason for this is that in order to carry [Buddhist] compassion and filial obedience through to perfection it is necessary to assist good and punish evil. However, in killing [the enemy] one should swallow one's tears, bearing in mind the truth of killing yet not killing. (Quoted in Victoria 2003, 72)

Such remarks about 'killing yet not killing' are typical of the sophistry Zen masters resorted to in their justification of war. Victoria comments:

> In infusing the suicidal Japanese military spirit, especially when extended to civilians, with the power of religious belief, Japan's wartime Zen leaders revealed themselves to be *thoroughly and completely morally bankrupt*. (2003, 144 original emphasis)

Belligerent tendencies of the above kind are perhaps inevitable if one holds the belief that all duality (including that between good and evil) must be transcended. As Winston King notes in his book *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, 'Zen . . . has no intrinsic ethical quality or inner monitor, but . . . historically seems to be primarily a psychological technique for maximizing the visceral energies whatever their orientation' (1993, 190f). The leaders of Japan's main Zen sects issued a public apology for Zen's complicity in Japanese militarism in 2001, although they did not criticize specific teachers by name or repudiate their teachings affirming violence.

The militarism described above, however, is far from all-pervasive in Japan. The Nipponzan Myōhōji sect founded in 1917 staunchly supports pacifism and opposes nuclear weapons. Monks from the group can often be seen on peace marches chanting and beating their drums. The Nipponzan Myōhōji has built over eighty 'Peace Pagodas' worldwide. The group hopes that the pagodas and the sacred relics they house will exert a calming influence on a troubled world. The Cambodian monk Mahā Ghosānanda was influenced by the ideals of this group. He worked as a consultant to the United Nations and became an ambassador for peace worldwide. Daisetsu Ikeda, president of Sōka Gakkai International (SGI), has also been an active peace campaigner for many years. The objectives of SGI include the aim of 'Working for peace by opposing all forms of violence and contributing to the welfare of humankind by pursuing humanistic culture and education.' Another Japanese group active on this front is Risshō Kōsei-kai, which in 1978 established the Niwano Peace Foundation 'to contribute to the realization of world peace'.

Elsewhere, it is estimated that 6 million Tibetans died and a further million fled the country as refugees in the aftermath of the Chinese invasion in 1959. Despite a systematic programme to suppress Buddhism, the Dalai Lama, the *de facto* leader of Tibet's Buddhists, has followed a policy of non-violent resistance, in recognition of which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

War and punishment

The image of Buddhism as an exclusively peace-loving religion is clearly incomplete, and the facts set out above problematize the issue of war and peace. If all use of force is ruled out, as the early texts suggest, how will it be possible to restrain violent criminals or terrorists who threaten innocent citizens? Since no Buddhist country has abolished the rule of law or is without some means to enforce it (such as an army or police force), it seems

that Buddhist moral principles must allow for some use of force if a stable society—itself a Buddhist ideal—is to be achieved. And if the use of force is morally justified against internal threats to security, might it not also be justified against external ones?

One of the earliest Western thinkers to ponder such questions was St Augustine (354–430 CE), and in the medieval period his ideas were developed and refined by St Thomas Aquinas (1224–1274 CE). Christian thinkers developed the doctrine of a 'just war' because of a perceived conflict between the need to defend Christian communities and states against attack and religious teachings such as the biblical commandment against killing and the injunction to 'turn the other cheek' (Matthew 5:38–41). In modern times, interest in the concept of a just war has been heightened as moralists, politicians, and military strategists ponder dilemmas arising in connection with nuclear weapons, the need for humanitarian intervention in situations like Kosovo, and the use of drone strikes as part of the 'war on terror'.

Just war thinking has two main branches. The first concerns the conditions that need to be satisfied for going to war and is summed up in the Latin phrase *jus ad bellum* (rightness in going to war). The second, known as *jus in bello* (rightness in the conduct of war), concerns things it is legitimate and not legitimate to do once a military campaign has been initiated. According to Aquinas there are three conditions that need to be satisfied for war to be just: it must be 1) waged by a legitimate authority (normally a state), 2) with right intent, and 3) with just cause. Two broad principles then govern the actual conduct of a military campaign: the violence used must be proportional to the injury suffered, and the weapons used must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants.

Traditional Buddhist commentators sometimes express views of a similar kind in the treatises on statecraft (*nītiśāstra*) referred to in the last chapter. They do not explain, however, how the pacifist ideal of *ahiṃsā* is to be accommodated to the realities of social and political life. An authoritative source on Buddhist statecraft mentioned in the last chapter is Mipham's *A Treatise on Ethics for Kings: An Ornament for Rulers* composed in 1895. This work was composed some two centuries after temporal and religious authority in Tibet were consolidated in the office of the Dalai Lama. Mipham tells us that he had considered the opinions of other great scholars from the Indian and Tibetan traditions, and his text provides us with a distillation of the Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective on the use of violence in punishment and war. Below, we provide a summary of his conclusions.

Punishment

In Mipham's view the king, as overseer of the law, should not hesitate to stamp out crime and improper behaviour by punishing evildoers. The failure to impose punishment, says Mipham, will lead to the increase of evil and the

destruction of the kingdom. Punishment should be guided by five principles: it should be just, fitting, principled, moderate, and benevolent (2017, 59). While the punishment of wrongdoers could include 'putting them in chains; imprisoning them; beating them; threatening, harassing, or banishing them; or confiscating their wealth' it should not include the death penalty, the amputation of limbs, or other cruel or excessive punishments since these 'cannot be reversed or remedied' in the event of judicial error (2017, 59). Punishment thus has both retributive and deterrent functions. It is retributive in being just, fitting, and principled, and deterrent in discouraging wrongdoing. Perhaps surprisingly, Mipham does not specify rehabilitation as an aim of punishment. He refers to it only obliquely when justifying the banishment of 'hardened criminals' whom the king has been unable to reform (2017, 177). In sum, 'Even though the king is compassionate,' says Mipham, 'he will impose timely and just punishments on criminals.'

War

Mipham recommends adopting a robust position in the face of military threats. 'If someone else acts violently toward you for no reason,' he writes, 'do not back off, but rather stand firm' (2017, 140). He envisages a Spartan-like society where citizens play an active role in defence of the nation. He writes: 'Strong armor and fortifications, and various types of horses and weaponry are amassed in the homes of every individual, each of whom is courageous and knows the martial arts.' Given this state of military readiness, 'Soldiers and generals clad in armor will, when needed, spring immediately to action without delay' (2017, 163).

It is clear that Mipham is no pacifist. He asks rhetorically: 'Without hostility, how can one control just through peaceful means the enemies of karma, those incorrigibly evil men who would overthrow the kingdom and so forth?' (2017, 144). Living in troubled times, Mipham was very aware that wars occur and offers advice on their conduct. He sets out rules of war involving three types of strategy (2017, 68–73). Initially, the righteous king tries to avoid war by seeking allies and using diplomatic strategies, such as enticements and threats. In the second, he reflects on ways to achieve victory with minimal loss of life. In the third, once conflict becomes inevitable, he marshals his forces employing appropriate military tactics. Then, 'he quickly assesses the machinations of the enemy, whose evil tradition is spreading like a blight, and he exterminates it. This is how the wise act' (2017, 204). The wise king, however, does not act precipitately and 'will start friendships and wars at the right time' (2017, 201).

Compassion

Despite his hawkish tone Mipham stresses the importance of compassion. He writes, 'the king subjugates the wicked without losing his compassion for them' (2017, 71). Somewhat paradoxically Mipham also tells us: 'All

living creatures value their own lives, so the king must completely abandon killing . . . and to the best of his ability bring an end to violence against any being, down to birds and wild animals' (2017, 177). Mipham does not explain how the injunction to 'abandon killing' is to be reconciled with the king's obligation to punish wrongdoers and defend the kingdom. He tells us only that if the king wounds or kills opponents in battle 'this constitutes only a minor moral fault' that may attract no karmic retribution 'because the motivating force behind his action was unwavering compassion' (2017, 70).

Mipham appears to justify violence here on grounds of motivation. This is consistent with the general Buddhist strategy of analyzing moral problems through the lens of psychology. As Rupert Gethin notes, 'For early Buddhist thought the problem of violence is basically a mental one' (2007, 61). Attention, accordingly, is focused on volition and karmic consequences rather than objective moral principles like justice. As Daniel Kent observes with reference to Sri Lanka:

> When asked of their concerns about war, soldiers and monks spoke in terms of karma and intentionality rather than in terms of justice. Soldiers do not ask monks to justify the civil war, but about the karmic consequences of their actions. Indeed, the vast majority of monks deny that Buddhism can ever condone war. "Will I receive negative karma if I kill the enemy on the battlefield?" many soldiers ask. (2010, 159)

One of the most influential Mahāyāna texts on war is the *Satyakaparivarta*, the sixth chapter of which Mipham summarizes in his treatise. Sugiki comments that 'a key concern (if not the sole key concern)' of the text is whether 'it is possible to save warriors, who cannot observe the precept against killing because of their social role, from suffering unhappy karmic retribution' (2020, 3). The reason the social role of the warrior is problematic is that according to Abhidhamma teachings violence is invariably motivated by hatred, and it is hatred that produces bad karma rather than violence *per se*. However, there is reason to be sceptical about the Abhidhamma claim (Keown 2016). For one thing, there is no empirical evidence that violence is always motivated by hatred, and there is much evidence that killing is often motivated by compassion, as we will see in the case of euthanasia (Chapter Eleven). Many Mahāyāna sources claim that killing can be motivated by compassion, as does Mipham.

Leaving the psychological point to one side, however, we note interesting similarities between the three conditions for just war set forth by Aquinas, and Mipham's position. We might suggest, for example, that Mipham's 'unwavering compassion' seems to correspond to Aquinas's third requirement for a just war, namely 'right intent' (*recta intentio*). On this understanding, compassion is not so much a tender-hearted sentiment as a principled commitment to 'the set of underlying moral dispositions that are requisite for persons engaged in matters of war' (Reichberg 2017, 113). The ends of

'right intent' in this context extend from 'the overarching intention to promote peace and the wellbeing of decent people (especially the poor), right down to the exclusion of cruelty, fraud, and, by implication, intent to kill or harm innocents' (Finnis 1998, 285). It seems likely Mipham would regard these as legitimate ends for a compassionate ruler to pursue through military means.

What about the second requirement for a just war, namely 'just cause'? In Aquinas's view, the enemy's misconduct in causing harm for which reparation is unforthcoming constitutes a legitimate cause of action or ground of complaint justifying a punitive response. In similar vein Mipham counsels, 'Don't plunder an opponent's kingdom *without proper cause* such as being attacked' (2017, 153 my emphasis). We also recall that according to Mipham the king has a second 'unwavering' commitment, this time to justice, and we note that in Mipham's view justice is served by compassionately motivated punishment. 'To bear compassion in mind,' he says, is 'to justly punish the wicked with righteous punishments' (2017, 58). Compassion here evidently involves a commitment to justice. We saw above that Mipham characterizes enemy forces in moral terms when he speaks of their 'machinations' and describes them as an 'evil tradition spreading like a blight.' It seems reasonable to understand him here as seeing war as justified punishment for the enemy's wickedness.

Aquinas's first condition is that war can only be declared by a rightful sovereign. Mipham makes no mention of such a condition, but it seems implicit in his advice since his treatise presupposes a legitimate ruler as protagonist.

In sum, we note that Mipham upholds the king's right to punish wrongdoers and to defend the kingdom, from which we see that at least one influential commentator has no principled objection to the publicly authorized use of military and punitive violence. In this respect he is far from alone, and an exception in this respect has long been accepted. As Jerryson notes, in 'canonical and commentarial sources throughout the different Buddhist schools . . . exceptions empower or legitimate kings and rulers' (2013, 44).

Terrorism

'Terrorism' is not an easy term to define since, as commonly noted, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. Groups who are characterized as 'terrorist' today can tomorrow constitute the official government of a country, as in the case of the African National Congress, which was designated as a terrorist organization by Britain and the United States in 1987 but subsequently came to form the government of South Africa. The term 'terrorist' was originally coined and applied in self-reference by French revolutionaries in the 1790s, but few people today would welcome the epithet, preferring to describe themselves as 'urban guerrillas' or even 'holy warriors'.

The Wordnet online dictionary at Princeton University defines terrorism as 'the calculated use of violence (or threat of violence) against civilians in order to attain goals that are political or religious or ideological in nature; this is done through intimidation or coercion or instilling fear'. This definition makes clear why terrorism is regarded as immoral in terms of just war theory: terrorist groups do not constitute a legitimate political authority (contrary to the first *jus ad bellum* requirement) and they specifically target civilians in their attacks in order to spread terror among the population at large (contrary to *jus in bello* stipulations).

Contemporary Buddhist responses to terrorism have tended to make three main points. First, that we must try to understand fully the causes that have led to the present situation. The doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca-samuppāda*) teaches that conflicts arise from a nexus of causes and conditions, and lasting solutions cannot be found until we fully understand the reasons why these situations come about. Second, we must respond to aggression with compassion as opposed to hatred; and third, violence will only lead to a cycle of retaliation and make the chances of peace even more remote. The need for reflection and self-criticism was mentioned by Thich Nhat Hanh. After the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, he expressed the view that America would have been better off with dialogue. Identifying the key question as 'Why would anyone hate us enough to do that?', he offered the response: 'If we are able to listen, they will tell us.'

Aung San Suu Kyi, who at the time was leader of the Burmese democracy movement and winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, made the following comment on terrorism in a newspaper interview in 2003:

> You know, I am a Buddhist. As a Buddhist, the answer is very simple and clear. That is compassion and mercy is the real panacea. I am sure that, when we have compassion and mercy in our heart, we can overcome not only terrorism but also many other evil things that are plaguing the world.

Subsequent events, however, have given her words something of a hollow ring. Since becoming the *de facto* leader of Myanmar in 2016, Suu Kyi has been denounced by her former international supporters for refusing to condemn what has been described by the UN as 'a textbook example of ethnic cleansing' against the country's Rohingya Muslim minority. There were anti-Muslim riots in Myanmar in 2000–1 and 2011–12, and in 2017 the UN Secretary-General noted how 'A vicious cycle of persecution, discrimination, radicalization and violent repression has led more than 400,000 desperate people to flee' (the figure is now almost double). Investigators attribute the attacks to a combination of Buddhist fanaticism and Burmese nationalism and speak of an orchestrated campaign of 'Buddhist terrorism' against the Muslim minority

The Burmese MaBaTha ('The Association for the Protection of Race and Religion') mentioned in Chapter Two enjoys the support of many Buddhist clergy and has been at the forefront of anti-Muslim protests, citing fears about the threat of the higher Muslim birth rate to the survival of Buddhism (this despite the fact that Muslims constitute less than 5 per cent of the population). The group has successfully lobbied for laws restricting interfaith marriage. Ironically, many of its members participated peacefully in the 'Saffron Revolution' of 2007 in a non-violent attempt to overthrow military rule, taking the *Mettā Sutta* (Discourse on Loving-kindness) as their inspiration.

A less publicized campaign has also been under way against the largely Christian minority in Kachin state in the north. Civilians have been systematically targeted by the Burmese army, and some 130,000 people have been displaced over the past decade. Suu Kyi has offered no 'simple and clear' response to these problems, and there has been little mention of Buddhist 'compassion and mercy' in her public statements. Both she and her government have also faced criticism for prosecuting journalists and activists, and as a result many of the international honours she was awarded have been revoked. In 2019 Suu Kyi defended the actions of the military against the Rohingya at a genocide case heard at the International Court of Justice in the Hague. At the time of writing, she has been jailed by the military on a range of charges including inciting dissent and breaking Covid-19 regulations.

The situation in Myanmar is not unique. Reference has already been made to human rights abuses by Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and in Japan and China Buddhism has colluded with state institutions of repression and control. With respect to Japan, Brian Victoria (2020) has explored the role of Zen nationalist ideology in domestic terrorism. In the 1930s, Zen practitioner Inoue Nisshō was the self-confessed leader of a terrorist group responsible for two killings and several failed assassination attempts (the band planned to kill some twenty influential figures). Inoue's claim to have experienced *kenshō* (seeing one's nature) was validated by one of the greatest Zen masters of the day, Yamamoto Gempō (1866–1961). Like many in the tradition, Inoue 'weaponized' Zen and harnessed it to an extreme right-wing ideology.

Conclusion

It seems that when confronting the issues of war and violence, Buddhists are pulled in two directions. On the one hand, the classical sources teach strict pacifism, while on the other Buddhist states have not been averse to the use of force and have frequently invoked religion as a justification for military campaigns. In south Asia this tension was relieved to some degree by subsequent merit-making activities, such as making lavish donations to the Order following a military victory. In Japan and other parts of east Asia the dissonance seems to have been less troubling. Perhaps it should be noted that war has rarely—if ever—been used by Buddhists for purposes of religious

coercion. Instead, as Jerryson points out, 'Most Buddhist-inspired wars are either the result of a closely-aligned monasticism and state, or a movement that contains millenarian elements' (2013, 59). In modern times, violence has frequently resulted from an explosive mixture of religion, ethnicity, and nationalism and shows little sign of abating.

While pacifism remains the ideal and may be a viable option for those who have renounced the world, pragmatic commentators like Mipham clearly do not see it as a workable policy. Mipham allows the use of force in the punishment of criminals and supports the compassionate use of violence in war. His rationale is that those who seek to subvert or overthrow a just social order—from either within or without—deserve punishment. Of course, any reasonable person would do well to pay heed to the three points made earlier by Buddhists, namely the importance of seeking to understand the causes of a conflict, showing compassion to opponents, and endeavouring to resolve disputes by peaceful means. It has been wisely said that 'pacifism does not mean passivism', and there is much useful work that can be done to remove injustice and the causes of dissent before they erupt into violent conflict.

Earlier, we mentioned the 'strategy of interpretation' proposed by Steven Collins that postulates two independent 'modes of Dhamma' existing in irreconcilable tension. He formulated the two modes as follows:

> *Mode 1* Dhamma is an ethics of reciprocity, in which the assessment of violence is context-dependent and negotiable . . . *Mode 2* Dhamma is an ethic of absolute values, in which the assessment of violence is context-independent and non-negotiable, and punishment, as a species of violence, is itself a crime. (1998, 420)

A successful 'middle way' on violence will need to reconcile these two modes. We might suggest that Mode 1 correctly describes the normative Buddhist position on military and punitive violence and as such *is* the 'middle way.' But is there not a conflict here with the Mode 2 claim that 'Dhamma is an ethic of absolute values?' Perhaps not, if this claim is formulated more precisely. There is indeed an absolute (unconditional) prohibition on violence in Buddhism, but this can be understood as a prohibition on *harming the innocent*, in other words, anyone who is not threatening or attacking the vital interests of another person. Mipham confirms this in his affirmation that 'It is utterly wrong to punish the innocent' (2017, 59). This is an exceptionless norm. In practice, this means that violence is prohibited except in cases of self-defence, the punishment of criminals, and military action against hostile forces. In the absence of such a 'middle way' on violence the institution of kingship, which Buddhism has always supported, seems unworkable. The unqualified interpretation of *ahiṃsā* represented by Mode 2 and expressed in many early sources is therefore not a position pragmatic commentators like Mipham would support.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Buddhism is often described as 'a religion of peace' but Buddhism's history and literature provide evidence to the contrary. According to Steven Collins, Theravāda scriptures present a categorical imperative to avoid violence, but also include an implicit ethics of just war. This contradiction remains unresolved.
- The earliest Theravāda model of a just ruler was the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. Typically, Aśoka reign is praised, however, he never disbanded his army and, according to literary records, killed more than 18,000 Jains and committed other atrocities even after turning to Buddhism.
- Most scriptures do not directly condemn a soldier for following her or his duty. The Abhidhamma, however, claims that all violence is motivated by hatred and therefore morally wrong, but it is questionable whether this psychological claim is true. Mahāyāna sources claim that violence can be motivated (and justified) by compassion.
- Buddhism seems to place kings in an impossible position. On the one hand they are told that all violence is wrong, and on the other that they have a duty to enforce the law and defend the kingdom. Some Mahāyāna sources authorise kings to use torture and harsh punishments. Others, like Mipham, justify violence on the basis of compassionate intentions.
- Historically, Buddhist monasteries have served as military outposts, monks have led revolts, and Buddhist principles have served as war rhetoric for heads of state. Monks became warriors in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Thai, and Sri Lankan traditions. Distinguishing between Buddhism and nationalism as justifications for violence can be problematic. Buddhists such as Tibetan, Thai, Cambodian, Sri Lankan, and Burmese consider their nationality intimately connected with Buddhism.

Discussion questions

1. Is Buddhism a religion of peace?
2. Is violence always motivated by hatred?
3. Is nationalism a valid justification for violence?
4. Is violence justified in defence of the Dharma?
5. It seems to follow from Buddhist teachings that 'only a fool becomes a king'. Do you agree?
6. How do Theravāda and Mahāyāna sources differ in their attitudes to violence?

Further reading

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Chapter Five
Economics

In this chapter

Politics and economics are ideologically intertwined, as in the classic example of Marxism, but since politics was discussed in the previous chapter we will focus here solely on questions of economics. Western theories of economics now dominate global thought, and the chapter begins with an introduction to these theories. Next, it traces the historical evolution of Buddhist economics and introduces the main contributors. It explains the foundational principles of Buddhist economics and their relevance for issues like the equitable redistribution of resources and climate change. The implication for the management of Buddhist businesses and movements is illustrated through three contemporary examples. As in the discussion of politics, it is important to distinguish 'Buddhist economics' as a *normative*, prescriptive, or constructivist discipline from what we might call 'the economics of Buddhism' which is an exegetical enterprise *describing* how Buddhist monasteries or other communities *in fact* manage their economic affairs.

Introduction

The aim of Buddhist economics as a *normative* enterprise is to create an alternative model that supports the fundamental aim of Buddhism, namely, to reduce suffering and increase well-being. To achieve this aim, Buddhist economics challenges the main assumptions of Western economics. Whereas the Western model is based on rational, selfish behaviour, the maximization of profit, competitive markets, and exploitation of the environment, Buddhist economics takes dependent origination as its foundation, sees individuals as in an interdependent relation both with each other and the Earth, encourages altruism, and emphasizes well-being and caring for the environment. Its goal in a nutshell, according to Brown, is 'shared prosperity in a sustainable world with minimal suffering' (2018, 1). The contrasts between Buddhist and Western economics have been summed up by Zsolnai in the form of a table (2007, 152).

Buddhist economics connects the highest ideals of Buddhism to the mundane lives of Buddhists around the world. The highest ideal of Buddhism is the well-being of all sentient beings, both spiritual and material, and Buddhist economics exists at the meeting point of these two realms. As Brown and Zsolnai note, 'In Buddhist economics, interconnectedness moves us from a focus on the well-being of an individual to the well-being of everyone and the environment. Buddhist economics connects the suffering of one person to the suffering for all people, and social welfare depends on the well-being of each person and of nature' (2018, 3).

Modern Western economics	Buddhist economics
Maximize profit	Minimize suffering
Maximize desires	Minimize desires
Maximize market	Minimize violence
Maximize instrumental use	Minimize instrumental use
Maximize self-interest	Minimize self-interest
'Bigger is better'	'Small is beautiful'
'More is more'	'Less is more'

Table 2: Contrasts between Buddhist and Western Economics

Western historical views and categories

The economies most of us live in today are market-driven with a focus on short-term profits and growth. Many people take this as the only way things could be, assuming that the alternative is some form of authoritarian communism. However, between these two extremes lie a number of well-developed economic systems in practice throughout the world. Some of these have been significantly influenced by Buddhist values and could become even more so in the future. Before we examine Buddhist views and practices, let us first situate ourselves in the history of the globally dominant system of free-market capitalism.

Like many technical terms in the English lexicon, 'economics' is derived from a Greek word: *oikonomikos*. Originally meaning 'household management' it was later extended to cover national markets and finally the global movement and management of goods, services, and wealth (Ng 2020, 43f; Shields 2018, 407). Scholars in the Western world recognized that resources, particularly those that were scarce or limited, could affect human ideals and behaviour. Therefore, studying the relationship between people and those resources—how they were developed, moved, and consumed—was seen as a way to ensure greater prosperity for the future.

As noted, two theories of economics developed in the West—capitalism and socialism—have spread throughout the world in the course of globalization. However, this twofold classification oversimplifies matters, and as Ernest Ng points out, the schools of capitalist economic thought can be divided into nine categories: Classical, Neoclassical, Marxist, Developmentalist, Austrian, Schumpeterian, Keynesian, Institutionalist and the Behaviorist (2020, 45). While we will not delve into each here in depth, it is important to recognize the variety of historically Western perspectives on economics, each reflecting different understandings of human nature and the goals of both individual human lives and of society as a whole.

Capitalism

The most dominant economic theory in the world today is capitalism. Simply put, capitalism is the economic system in which work and goods are controlled by means of private ownership rather than state or collective ownership. Further features of capitalist economies include *the individual ownership of labour* (as opposed to indentured servitude, serfdom, or slavery) and the centrality of *markets* as mechanisms for trade and compensation for both labour and goods. In advanced capitalist societies, markets also serve as the place where ownership and debt, represented by stocks and bonds, are valued and exchanged. A final feature typically found in capitalist economies is a division of *classes* between capitalists, whose work involves the buying and selling of commodities that they own, and workers, who engage in the creation and maintenance of items that are owned and sold by capitalists. This often breaks down into further divisions ranging from non-working elites with vast hereditary capital to the non-working homeless, who cannot or will not participate in the market economy.

A basic principle of capitalism is the importance of the individual. Proponents of capitalism point to the success of the theory in raising individuals from a condition of serfdom and slavery and providing an opportunity for all citizens to accumulate wealth. Collective action, such as starting a company, is also championed as a natural move when competitors realize that they can work better together. Furthermore, individuals in capitalist societies get more choices and can directly reward better producers by purchasing their items. In our globalized marketplace, many of us enjoy drinking Columbian coffees or Australian wines, eating fresh fruits from Malaysia or Peru, checking social media on our Korean smartphone, and typing on computers manufactured in China or watching television programs produced in America.

However, opponents of capitalism point out that these goods and services are only possible for most of us due to the mitigating effects of socialism. That is, if an idealized or 'pure' capitalism were to exist, most of us would not have access to the abundance that it creates. This is because unregulated or *laissez faire* capitalism allows the wealthiest in society to gain greater and greater control of assets and political power while the vast majority of workers remain poor. Much of early modern Europe and America saw the playing out of a dynamic in which capitalists gained vast power only to be pushed back by socialist forces through union organizing and government regulations (Fulcher 2004).

Socialism

Out of this struggle arose three related though clearly differentiated alternatives to capitalism: socialism, communism, and Marxism. Indeed, each of these, like capitalism, has internal divisions and sub-schools of thought, making broad generalizations impossible (Gilabert and O'Neill 2019). For present

purposes, we focus on socialism, as it presents an economic system that has arisen and existed alongside capitalism over the last two centuries. In the simplest terms, socialism is the economic theory in which the means of production, trade, and labour are owned or otherwise closely controlled by the society as a whole.

A key feature of socialism is a broad ideal of equality in terms of access to material goods. Certain universally recognized goods, such as food, housing, and healthcare, are provided to all based on needs rather than ability to pay. Second, socialists embrace democracy, opening access to societal decisions as widely as possible. Third, socialists embrace the ideals of individual freedom and self-realization; arguing that until basic material needs are met, humans cannot truly be free to attain higher goals, such as studying philosophy, creating art, or pursuing religious ideals. Finally, socialists emphasize the importance of solidarity or communal interests, recognizing that our own freedom and expression cannot come at the expense of others (Gilabert and O'Neill 2019). Socialists point to efforts by unions and governments as expressions of their ideals. For example, the eight-hour workday, work-free weekends, and minimum wages are expressions of worker organization and solidarity, giving people freedom from excessive labour to enjoy other pursuits. Similarly, many governments subsidise basic foodstuffs and provide free healthcare to citizens.

As socialism grew out of capitalism, it did so with specific critiques. In particular, socialists argue that capitalism leads to *exploitation* as profits become central to decision-making. Some of the goods enjoyed in capitalist societies have will have been made with slave or child-labour, and some are made and/or transported in ways that exploit and destroy the environment. A second critique is that workers in capitalist societies are *alienated* from their labour. Because basic needs are not provided for in capitalist societies, many workers must toil in jobs that they do not love creating wealth that they do not get to enjoy. After long hours of work in jobs that leave them emotionally drained, many workers in a capitalist society cannot pursue self-realizing activities.

A final critique is the *inefficacy* of capitalist economies. Here a number of issues are debated, but socialists argue that certain aspects of capitalism ensure waste. They point at the boom-and-bust cycle of capitalism as problematic, as profit-seekers often crowd into a market-sector, driving up production and profits until that sector collapses due to over-production. Capitalist societies are also prone to environmental destruction in practices such as strip-mining, clear-cutting and crop mono-cultures that drive up profits in the short-term but leave behind ecological and economic disaster (Gilabert and O'Neill 2019).

Criticisms of the above kind are not exhaustive, and as one might have gathered, many proponents of socialism seek only to socialize certain aspects of an economy that is otherwise capitalist in nature. And, in practice, no

economy has either given completely free reign to market forces or completely eliminated markets. While capitalist ideals are dominant in the world today it is fair to say that no capitalist economy is free from socialist ideals and practices. Countries where socialized practices such as high minimum wages and free healthcare are predominant—such as certain Scandinavian countries—are often called socialist, whereas countries where practices such as stock market trading and growing private companies are praised are called capitalist.

It is in this complex of ideals and practices that modern Buddhism emerges. It is notable that a hallmark of change in Buddhism in the last two centuries has been the impact of modern capitalism, originally brought via colonialism (Park 2009). It was only after World War II that more clearly socialist, especially Marxist and communist, economics was presented as an option for Buddhists. However, that is not to suggest that socialism has played only a minor role in the development of Buddhist economics. As we shall see, Buddhist economists have generally placed their thought directly between—or as an alternative third way to—these two major economic theories.

Buddhist historical views and practice

At the outset of our examination, it is important to identify a common misinterpretation about Buddhism that has been referred to previously. This is the view of Buddhism as an entirely 'other-worldly' religion in pursuit of purely transcendent ends, leading many to see such ideas as Buddhist politics or Buddhist economics as oxymoronic. As mentioned in Chapter One, this idea was initially championed by the great German sociologist and historian Max Weber (1864–1920), who famously coined the term the 'Protestant work ethic' to explain the economic conditions of modern Europe and North America as a product of inner-worldly asceticism. In contrast to this was the other-worldly nature of Buddhism which, according to Weber, orients followers away from worldly concerns (Ng 2020, 15f; Harvey 2000; 2019). While Weber was not entirely mistaken, his assessment of Buddhism relied heavily on textual accounts which extol Buddhist ideals in isolation from data about how Buddhists actually lived.

Although Buddhists are often portrayed as rejecting the material world in favour of spiritual pursuits, the religion has always coexisted closely with money and materiality. Simply out of necessity, Buddhist monastics have had to rely either upon the generosity of laypeople for basic supplies such as food, clothing, and shelter, or they have become landowners or found other ways to make money. Laypeople, likewise, have had to work within the economic systems of their time while seeking to support monastic communities. While systems such as capitalism and socialism would have been foreign to pre-modern Buddhists, complex ideas around reciprocity, methods of supporting the *saṅgha*, and types of generosity date back to the teachings of the Buddha, as we see from the following passage:

> This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I have heard: 'There are these two kinds of gifts: a gift of material things and a gift of the Dhamma. Of the two, this is supreme: a gift of the Dhamma. There are these two kinds of sharing: sharing of material things and sharing of the Dhamma. Of the two, this is supreme: sharing of the Dhamma. There are these two kinds of assistance: assistance with material things and assistance with the Dhamma. Of the two, this is supreme: help with the Dhamma. (Iti 3.49)

Texts such as this and others directed at laity, such as the *Sigālaka Sutta* (DN 31) which we have mentioned several times, offer ideals for the economic life of Buddhists. While these and other doctrines have been studied widely in modern scholarship, the actual economic practices of Buddhists, or the 'economics of Buddhism' throughout history have received less attention.

Economic conditions at the time of the Buddha

The economic practices of Buddhists throughout history have been largely dictated by the prevailing economic conditions around them. In northern India at the time of the Buddha, a great deal of change was taking place as we noted in Chapter Three. The development of iron as a tool and a weapon allowed for both expansion of the clans and burgeoning urban centres as well as greater efficiency of ploughing fields, leading to greater surplus for farmers. Surplus rice and other crops gave rise to a growing class of traders and merchants and increasing complexity in urban centres with greater centralization and taxation. Other developments included coins as a medium of exchange and the growth of standing armies (Benavides 2005, 80f).

Understanding this lived experience helps in understanding the teachings of the Buddha as well as later developments in Buddhism's history. As Benavides points out, the disruption of old customs as well as the morbidity that would have accompanied early urbanization through the introduction of new diseases as well as the close proximity of many people would have made the reality taught in the first two noble truths seem quite clear and uncontroversial. Philosophically, the rapid change gave rise to uncertainty about long-held beliefs and customs. Economically, it led to new roles as well as new possibilities for power as successful farmers, traders, and even ascetics grew in wealth and social influence. Indeed, built into the early philosophy of Buddhism is an appreciation of the holders of new wealth, notably merchants as seen in the example of Tapussa and Bhalluka, two merchants who were the first to offer food to the Buddha after his awakening and his first two lay followers (Benavides 2005, 83). Wealthy individuals like the financier Anāthapiṇḍaka often became generous patrons of Buddhism. Subsequently, networks of trade were important channels for the growth and spread of Buddhism as monks accompanied merchants, for example along the Silk Road and by sea.

Buddhism beyond India

As Buddhism spread north into China and Tibet, it entered new societies with existing modes of exchange and ownership. In Tibet, Buddhism became the *de facto* state religion under King Trisong Detsen (r. 755–797 CE), thus making many monasteries centres for both religious and political power. Before 1951, some monasteries acted as moneylenders. In China, as well, monasteries became centres of operations for pawnshops, auctions, and lottery sales (Benavides 2005, 85).

In China and later Korea and Japan, monasteries became landholders, selling goods grown and produced and employing labourers. Similarly, monasteries in Sri Lanka were classified as corporate property-owning institutions in the premodern period. Monasteries across the Buddhist world have also acted as providers of healthcare and as educational centres. Trine Brox and Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg provide a list of money making activities that monasteries have taken up over the course of Buddhism's history, including 'money-lending practices; mutual-financing associations; land-leasing operations; producing and selling commodities such as flour, silk, oil, and medicine; running businesses like grain mills, oil presses, and hostels; receiving donations in the form of cash money, land, and religious artifacts; and accepting sponsorship toward collective religious activities, refurbishment of temples, and so forth' (2017, 5). Buddhist clergy also traded in slaves on the Silk Road in the local markets in Dunhuang and Turfan. Ciulian Liu reports how 'Buddhist institutions and individual monks and nuns were involved in the slave trade as buyers, owners, sellers, and transaction witnesses' (2022).

This brief section on the 'economics of Buddhism' has sought to rectify a common misperception of Buddhism as a religion set apart from worldly, and thus economic, concerns. Buddhists throughout history have been intimately and creatively involved in the economic world (see also the section on 'Modern Expressions' below). While Buddhist ideals, like those of most religions, point followers beyond the mundane world, the path itself is paved with the realities of economic needs and desires. As Buddhists today and in the future navigate complex economic realities while seeking to pursue the Buddhist path, they too at times will have to choose one over the other as well as developing new and uniquely Buddhist economic ideals and practices.

The evolution of Buddhist economics

Matthew King has described two formative phases or 'iterations' in the modern evolution of 'Buddhist economics.' (Let us recall that by 'Buddhist economics' we refer to Buddhist *theories* of economics as distinct from 'the economics of Buddhism,' or how Buddhists *in practice* managed their economic affairs.) These two phases or iterations are associated with three thinkers: Weber, Schumacher, and Payutto. As we saw previously, Weber characterized Buddhism as a pure soteriology (a salvation religion) that had

little interest in economic or political matters. We noted further in Chapter Two that Weber's views are shared to some degree by 'disengaged Buddhism' and are compatible with Moore's political theory of 'limited citizenship.'

The second iteration of 'Buddhist economics' came into being in the 1960s and took the form of a critique of Western models of development, whether capitalist or Marxist. Two authors played a leading role here. The first is E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977) who first coined the term 'Buddhist economics' in the 1960s, and in 1973 published *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. The second author is the Venerable Payutto (b. 1938), a Thai monastic scholar who 'infused Schumacher's rather romantic reflections with the gravitas of scriptural citation.' As King puts it, 'Payutto put the Buddhism into Schumacher's Buddhist Economics' (2018, 8). Payutto's central idea was to replace craving (*taṇhā*) as the root motivation for economic development with *chanda*, or wholesome desires. We will review the ideas of these two thinkers below.

Schumacher: 'small is beautiful'

Ernst Friedrich Schumacher (1911–1977) was born in Germany and educated there before earning a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford and going on to Columbia University in New York City. He settled in England as an economist where he exchanged letters with the famous economist John Maynard Keynes. Schumacher gained a reputation for his early work on the economics of power generation, driving the trend toward coal and away from reliance on oil and nuclear power. In 1955, while working as an adviser to the British National Coal Board, Schumacher travelled to Myanmar (formerly Burma) as an economic consultant. In Myanmar Schumacher was alarmed by the disruptive effects of rapid development and grew to appreciate the traditions of this Theravāda Buddhist nation. It was based on his experiences in Myanmar that he coined the term 'Buddhist Economics' in the 1960s after his return to England.

In 1966, Schumacher wrote the essay 'Buddhist Economics,' which was later republished in his book *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973). His essay begins with the premise that 'Right Livelihood,' a factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, is the natural source for a Buddhist economics. In opposition to Western utilitarian theories which reduce humans to labour output and wage compensation, Schumacher suggests that Buddhist economics offers a threefold justification for work:

1. To allow people to develop their abilities.
2. To allow people to overcome self-centeredness through joining others.
3. To create the goods and services needed for society.

He situates this threefold justification as a middle way between two extremes. On the one side is meaningless and stultifying labour which would, 'indicate a greater concern with goods than with people, an evil lack of compassion

and a soul-destroying degree of attachment to the most primitive side of this worldly existence'. On the other is the extreme of giving up all work in favour of pure leisure. Rejecting this dichotomy, Schumacher sees work and leisure as 'complimentary parts of the same living process' (1973, 58).

Schumacher suggests that the Buddhist middle way offers a philosophy of wealth that might be summed up as follows: 'It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them. The keynote of Buddhist economics, therefore, is simplicity and non-violence' (1973, 60). This approach contrasts with the focus on production and consumption as measures of the economic health of a society as found in the West.

The Buddhist philosophy advocated by Schumacher maintains an acceptance of wealth, used appropriately, and argues for the importance of labour in pursuit of a fulfilled human life. With this Buddhist approach to economics, holism is emphasized: the whole of the person's life, whole communities, and whole ecosystems are valued. Well-being, Schumacher notes, cannot be reduced to simple metrics. As he witnessed in Myanmar in the 1950s, the well-being of many in the poorer society was clearly better than many in stressed-out and high-paced, yet wealthy, Western nations.

Schumacher also suggests that a life of simplicity such as that found in Myanmar naturally lends itself to non-violence: as needs and wants are minimized, it is less likely that people will feel the need to fight over limited resources. Instead, the economy should focus on satisfying basic needs and doing so from local sources as much as possible. This helps build community ties and respect for local resources and one's ecosystem and minimizes dependence on far-flung governments and costly modes of transportation.

A further line of thought touched upon, but not developed, in Schumacher's essay was the connection between the economy and ecology (the two terms share the Greek root *eco* meaning home). Citing no text or known activity among the Burmese, Schumacher asserts that the Buddha's teachings direct one toward reverence for all living beings and in particular, trees. He wrote, 'Every follower of the Buddha ought to plant a tree every few years and look after it until it is safely established, and the Buddhist economist can demonstrate without difficulty that the universal observation of this rule would result in a high rate of genuine economic development independent of any foreign aid' (1973, 63). This injunction to plant and care for trees can be seen as both connecting us to nature and to the basic resources of our lives, air and wood.

In brief, Schumacher offered a Buddhist economics which was in many ways in clear contrast to the modern economics of the West. It is human, community, and ecosystem-centric, whereas modern economics reduces humans to their consumption and labour output; erases community ties if they

will improve production and thus capital; and approves of globalized trade to provide resources for consumption no matter what the environmental or social costs. On the other hand, Schumacher's Buddhist economics praises the value of work or labour as an essential part of a good life. Wealth is seen not as problematic as long as it is used in pursuit of the ultimate goal of liberation. This presents Buddhist economics as a clear alternative for Western economics yet as a system that could be adopted gradually by any Western society that chose to prioritise human liberation or awakening over consumption and comfort.

Schumacher was among the class of Western scholars who are sometimes referred to disparagingly as 'Orientalists' because of a tendency to romanticise a static and idealized Buddhism and ignore the particular historical and cultural conditions that produced it (King 2018, 6). Schumacher thus made no attempt to analyse Buddhist texts and concepts—such as the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*) and Right Livelihood (*sammājīva*)—in the context of the economic structures of Myanmar or other Buddhist nations. Instead, he assumes that the ideals found in textual Buddhism play a direct role in the organizing principles of countries where Buddhism is the dominant religion.

Schumacher's work stands as a foundation for further 'constructivist' development in Buddhist economics. He was an expert in Western economic theory and knew where to look for alternatives. His study of Asia and of Buddhist history was not as thorough, leaving his version of Buddhist economics vague and utopian in nature. Owing to this, his work has been criticized for failing to show clearly how his ideals could be put into practice (Zadek 1997).

Payutto: 'a middle way'

Prayudh (P.A.) Payutto (b. 1938) (also known as Phra Rājavaramuni or Venerable Dhammapitaka) is a well-known Thai monk and scholar. He has been an advocate for re-establishing the *Bhikkhunī saṅgha* and for greater protection of the environment. In both areas, as well as his work on Buddhist economics, he has been careful to draw from both canonical texts as well as Buddhist history. In doing so, Payutto constructs a Buddhist economics that promises to unite Buddhists from disparate traditions and offers a clearer route toward realizing its key goals (King 2018, 8).

Encouraged by Schumacher's framework, Payutto's work draws deeply from Buddhist texts to strengthen and clarify the case for Buddhist economics. Payutto acknowledged that the life of the Buddha and monastics in the early *saṅgha* as reflected in the Pali texts do not offer any direct teachings on what we know as 'economics' today. There are nonetheless many texts that deal with material conditions, ethics of exchange, and moral and social development and ideals. It is from these texts that Payutto constructs his Buddhist economics.

Like Schumacher, Payutto places Buddhist economics in opposition to Western models of economic thought which isolate and reduce human activity instead of seeing it in terms of broader social and ecological connections. As such, he suggests that a Buddhist economics would be 'not seen as an independent, self-contained science but as one of a number of interdependent disciplines working within the whole social/existential matrix' (Payutto 2016, 4).

Drawing on early Buddhist psychological and ethical concepts, Payutto suggests we differentiate between *taṇhā* and *chanda*, two Pāli terms that could be translated by the same English word 'desire.' The first of these terms, *taṇhā*, could be described as a psychological thirst, always seeking new objects in the hope of being quenched. Elsewhere, Payutto equates *taṇhā* with greed or covetousness (*lobha*). This self-centred desire stands in contrast to *chanda*, a desire directed at wisdom and well-being, such as the desire to help others or to overcome afflictions like addiction or habitual anger. This distinction allows an economy to move forward based on the satisfaction of wholesome, ethical goals that strengthen communal and environmental harmony instead of selfish and materialistic ends.

As with Schumacher, wealth is not problematic in itself: what is important is how it is used. 'A wealthy man can do much more either for the better or for the worse of the social good than a poor man . . . acquiring wealth is acceptable if, at the same time, it promotes the well-being of a community or society' (Payutto 1990, 45). Indeed, the Buddha himself praised contentment (*santuṭṭhi*). With contentment an ordinary person can let go of unwholesome desires that lead to harmful accumulation and those who are well off can practice generosity (*dāna*), a core Buddhist virtue.

Payutto's ability to draw deeply from Buddhist texts allowed him to formulate an economics which could stand in contrast to both capitalism and communism, each of these being judged as overly 'worldly' as opposed to the overtly moral character of the 'middle way' found in Buddhist economic theory (Shields 2013, 491f). He acknowledges that until now economic thought necessarily had to be developed out of one of these two opposing Western theories. Both, however, emphasize reductionistic and materialistic visions of mankind, making Buddhism's path away from material ends a clear alternative.

According to Payutto, the Dharma presents a 'natural law' accessible to all through practice and through adherence to the teachings (*sutta*s) and disciplinary code (*Vinaya*) set forth by the Buddha (Shields 2013, 419). The *sutta*s provide extensive details on the moral path of cultivation for the individual. And, while the *sutta*s by no means exclude social teachings, as we saw in Chapter One, the clearest set of rules for behaviour conducive to harmonious communal living come in the *Vinaya*, which, while explicitly taught to monastics, can be adapted by laity to varying extents. Payutto offers an example in his treatment of moderation as a principle for Buddhist

economics, citing a *sutta* discussing monastic reflections on moderation before a meal. The goal of moderation, he notes, 'is not restricted to monastics; it applies to all Buddhists. We should reflect intelligently on food that the true purpose of eating is not for fun, for indulgence or the fascination of taste. We reflect that it is inappropriate to eat things just because they are expensive and fashionable' (2016, 33).

Throughout his works, Payutto emphasizes the centrality of the moral and spiritual development of the individual. The individual, however, is always situated within social and environmental contexts that need to be nurtured for that development to proceed. Material possessions and even great wealth are not problematic if these considerations are not lost sight of, as they tend to be in Western economic theories. His vision of a Buddhist economics thus broadens the application of Buddhist moral values into the social and political spheres, as we see from the following statements:

> If, due to a thriving economy, people have abundant material possessions, but they are infatuated by these things, allow their human potential to go to waste, and become more depraved, their prosperity is lacking in merit. People then obtain material things in order to squander their humanity. If such a situation occurs economics will not escape from being called once again a 'dismal science,' in an even more profound sense than was originally intended.
>
> If, however, economics encourages a management of the economy in a way supportive to true human development:
> A. It will not get bogged down trying to bring about economic prosperity in order to fulfil the gratification of only a few individuals or groups of individuals.
> B. It will aim to establish an economics of sufficiency, enabling people to create a virtuous and peaceful personal life, society, and world. (Payutto 2016, 52f)

Like Schumacher, Payutto presents an idealized and dehistoricised version of Buddhist ethics, disconnected from the micro and macro economics found in actual Buddhist communities and nations. Payutto recognizes and writes of the interdependence of individual and social goods, but nonetheless does not articulate social goals or values. Instead, his work focuses heavily on a psychologized, modernist reading of Theravādin Buddhist thought which places the removal of 'worldly' greed, aversion, and ignorance at the heart of his economic thought. Lacking a clear discussion of the existing social structures, Payutto offers little advice for those seeking to move societies toward Buddhist economics (Shields 2018, 420).

Modern expressions of Buddhist economics

As already discussed, the ideal of a completely detached Buddhism, often derived from a selective choice of textual sources, is not what is found in the world of lived Buddhism. The ideal exists in the texts and is no doubt

important for most Buddhists, but also important is putting ideals into practice in challenging contexts. As will be apparent from the chapter this far, all Buddhist organizations and individuals could be said to partake in some kind of economic life. Some may follow the economics of their society relatively unreflectively, while others focus on improving their mental states by consuming with less greed, cultivating generosity, and so on. Others again have consciously attempted to develop uniquely Buddhist systems of economic life. To conclude the chapter, we will examine three of those here: 1) the Sarvōdaya Śramadāna movement of Sri Lanka; 2) the Santi Asoke movement of Thailand; and, to include a Western example, 3) the clothing company Patagonia, based in California. Other examples that could be examined include the Greyston Bakery in New York; the Belgian social enterprise 'Apopo' operating in Tanzania and other African countries; Windhorse Publishing based in England; Wat Dhammakaya in Thailand; and the Loden Foundation entrepreneurs in Bhutan (Brown and Zsolnai 2018; Schedneck 2019).

Sarvōdaya Śramadāna in Sri Lanka

The Sarvōdaya Śramadāna (Giving Labour for the Uplift of All) village development movement in Sri Lanka was founded by a Buddhist layman, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, in 1958. Two key principles of the Sarvōdaya philosophy are that laypeople can gain liberation and that an individual's society must also be liberated if he or she wishes to be awakened. As Clough observes, 'Neither the classical monastic interpreters nor their reformers have stressed the implications of the *dharma* for social change as clearly as Sarvodaya has. Sarvodaya has affirmed the world by arguing that the path to individual liberation begins with socio-economic liberation' (2000, 78).

Inspired by the works of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and the Sri Lankan Buddhist reformer Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864–1933), the Sarvōdaya movement drew heavily from the Pali Canon to suggest that the teachings were not only about transcending the world, but also about living ethically in the world. As Clough elucidates, one of the ways they do this is to reinterpret the Four Noble Truths. First, the truth of *dukkha* is interpreted as seeing the suffering around us and looking for ways to alleviate it. Second, the truth of the origin of suffering is elucidated in typical Buddhist fashion, pointing to the greed, aversion, and selfishness in the world today. Third, the truth of the cessation of suffering is stated as meaning that suffering can be alleviated in the world around us by following the fourth Noble Truth, the Eightfold Path. The Buddhist path for them is thus neither individual nor cosmic in scale: it is localized.

Members of Sarvōdaya typically attend a work camp for a week or longer; and at these camps they are deployed to areas where help is needed. There, they cooperate with local people to solve the problem or undertake the given task. The work is done with the principles of generosity, pleasant speech,

equality, and constructive work (Clough 2000, 83). As Clough observed in 2000, the organization was able to achieve impressive tasks through its Buddhist principles and local and cooperative program ethos. Today, the organization lives on as Sri Lanka's most broadly embedded community-based development organization, boasting 26 district centres, 325 divisional centres, and over 3,000 independent village societies across the nation.

Santi Asoke in Thailand

Santi Asoke (Peaceful Aśoka) is a new Buddhist movement with approximately 10,000 members throughout Thailand. The movement was founded in 1975 by Samana Phothirak, a Buddhist monk who found himself at odds with his preceptors and eventually Thailand's Supreme *Saṅgha* Council, who ordered him defrocked. Instead of disrobing, Phothirak created his own organization, quickly establishing four monasteries and subsequently several more small, self-sustaining communities in mostly rural areas throughout Thailand. Santi Asoke has established a variety of social welfare programs including second-hand stores, farmers' markets, vegetarian restaurants and more as part of their practice.

The movement is known for its sparce monasteries and promotion of a simple lifestyle. As Harvey notes, 'The emphasis is on a simple, moral life-style, in harmony with nature, and with daily tasks done with great care, and avoiding any waste. Community members, monastic or lay, mostly eat just once a day, and walk barefoot' (2013, 392). Like the Sarvōdaya Śramadāna, the movement is influenced by Gandhian ideals of self-sufficiency. As Brooke Schedneck notes, the movement offers its practitioners 'opportunities to live alternative lifestyles outside of modern-day capitalism in Thailand' (2019, 37).

The economic model put forth by Santi Asoke is all-encompassing, meaning that members take on a full-time life of simplicity inspired by Buddhist ascetic ideals. Members, including monastics, take up communal living in Asoke's communities, offering their work in exchange for basic necessities and free education. Instead of teaching silent, seated meditation practice, members of Santi Asoke are instructed to practice 'open eye' meditation as they work and interact with members of their community (Essen 2010, 85). This makes up the second part of the organization's three-part slogan: 'Consume Little, Work Hard, and Give the Rest to Society.' The third component is exemplified in the organization's non-profit markets and businesses, which ensure that those in need can find items such as clothing and food.

Patagonia clothing, USA

Many readers will be familiar with the brand name Patagonia for its wide range of outdoor clothing, but few may know that the company's founder, Yvon Chouinard, is a practicing Zen Buddhist. The company was founded in 1973 and is based in Ventura, California. A 'pioneer in ecological clothing,'

Patagonia has committed to a series of principles aimed at promoting sustainability, reducing unnecessary consumption, and supporting regenerative practices in ranching and agriculture through its business partners (Brown and Zsolnai 2018, 5).

To accomplish these goals, the company has set out a five-part plan detailing the steps it has taken. In its first step, Patagonia has worked to reduce its carbon footprint. It has done so by developing green building projects to reduce emissions from their retail stores, and it has implemented a program offering incentives to employees who cycle, carpool, or use public transportation to work. Second, the company has donated funds directly to organizations that restore and protect nature as a founding member of the '1 per cent for the planet' initiative wherein companies pledge 1 per cent of their income to environmental groups. Next, they have worked to make their products as durable as possible, encouraging consumers to buy second-hand and offering to repair products. Lastly, the company has established an investment fund to help 'like-minded responsible start-up companies bring about positive benefit to the environment' (Brown and Zsolnai 2018, 6).

In essence, the company embodies the principles of compassion, generosity, and simplicity found in Buddhist teachings. In 2013, Chouinard was the first business leader to win the Inamori Ethics Prize, an award recognizing ethical leadership founded by Kazuo Inamori, a Japanese entrepreneur, philanthropist, and Zen Buddhist priest. In his acceptance speech, Chouinard detailed the history of his business and his discovery that his company had been contributing to the destruction of the earth through pollution, pesticide use, and waste. His conscience led him to methodically reorient every possible aspect of the company toward sustainable and healthful ends for his family, his company, and the planet.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Buddhist economics is an important area of thought and practice. While our modern world is dominated by capitalism, with socialism as its main alternative, Buddhist economics presents a third path for those interested in the future of economic thought. While Buddhists may profitably contribute to this third path as they seek a more balanced livelihood and lifestyle, others may find it useful for its humanizing effects as well as its emphasis on our connection both with each other and with nature. For others, Buddhist economics may simply offer a counter to the dominance of Western theories of life in the world today. Matthew King in his overview of Buddhist economics points out how Buddhist economics has less to do with economics proper and more to do with a 'Buddhist scale of value' in which efforts are made to lessen the authority of 'Western' economics and alter the course of materialist development in Asia (2016, 19).

Buddhists in the modern age, and throughout history, have had to provide for their basic material needs. While the ideal for many is to live outside of established economic models, simply accepting what is given by the laity in exchange for the gift of the teachings, this has often not been possible in practice. Today we see a variety of businesses and entire Buddhist movements seeking to redefine their economic realities with Buddhist principles in mind. In doing so, they often rely at least in part on prevailing economic models (most often capitalism), but they also challenge the underlying greed, competition, violence, and environmental degradation caused by prevailing economic theories. So far, most Buddhist economics has been based on Theravāda teachings. By contrast, contemporary Tibetan scholar Sherab Tendar (1968-) has sought economic direction and authority from Indo-Tibetan literature. He notes that Mahāyāna sources place a greater emphasis on generosity (*dāna*) and the accumulation of wealth for benefitting others (King 2018).

In many ways, Buddhist economics remains open to new developments and ideas. As Buddhism continues to develop in the twenty-first century and beyond, Buddhists will have ample opportunities to envision and enact new ways of relating to the economic world. As Harvey notes, 'in modern times we see Buddhist ideas being drawn on to support socialism in Burma, capitalism in Thailand, and communism in China and Laos' (Harvey 2018, 387). Judging from the past, much of this might involve simply fitting in well with prevailing economic systems. It might also involve advocating change in societies, such as those found in the modern examples above. Nowhere, to our knowledge, has Buddhism entered a new society without being changed itself.

Let us close with three possible paths for Buddhist economics going forward. First, Buddhist economics might grow and thrive *within* the dominant capitalist framework, as Buddhist individuals and communities do their work, earn pay cheques, and live more simply in harmony with their society and nature. These individuals might use their pay cheques toward *dhammic* ends, that is toward advancing their own practice and supporting others. This itself could be the good karma sought and advocated for by Buddhists (Essen 2010, 75). Second, capitalism might dilute Buddhism to such a great extent that the true teachings are lost. In this case, simplistic and commodified versions of Buddhism will be all that survive (critics of the Mindfulness movement suggest this is already happening, and others point with concern to scandals within traditional schools of Buddhism). Third, the rapid change upon us today—from globalization to the climate crisis—might lead vast numbers of people to question prevailing economic paradigms, opening the door for an interconnected, green, Buddhist revolution in thought. Just as the upheaval of the Iron Age in the Buddha's time opened a path for him and other new religious and philosophical movements in northern India, the changes in humanity's material conditions today might lead to rapid spread of Buddhism, sustainable living, and peace.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Buddhist economics offers an alternative model that challenges the main assumptions of Western economics and opposes consumerism. The three most important scholars in the field of Buddhist economics have been Weber, Schumacher, and Payutto. Weber claimed Buddhism had little interest in economics; Schumacher coined the name 'Buddhist economics' and launched the field in the 1960s and 1970s; Payutto supplied textual support for Schumacher's theories from primary sources.
- 'Buddhist economics' as a *normative* and theoretical discipline can be distinguished from 'the economics of Buddhism'. The latter provides a *descriptive* account of the economic life of Buddhist communities or an *exegesis* of Buddhist scriptures. The approaches of Schumacher and Payutto are normative (or constructivist) in proposing ways that traditional teachings can meet modern needs.
- Schumacher spent some time in Burma and was shocked at the impact of rapid development on rural society. He proposed a new economic model based on Buddhist principles in his now famous 1973 volume *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. Payutto proposed replacing craving (*taṇhā*) as the root motivation for economic development with *chanda*, or wholesome desires.
- More recent commentators like Shields have criticized Schumacher and Payutto for offering simplistic remedies (like ceasing to desire consumer goods and dreaming of a return to a pre-modern village life). It is claimed these writers fail to appreciate the deeper ways in which material conditions shape human consciousness.
- Critics question whether green growth is enough to support ecological sustainability and argue that proponents of ecology often assume a receptive middle-class audience for their message. They do not explain how they will convince sceptics or poor people in developing economies to adopt a green agenda.

Discussion questions

1. How would you distinguish Buddhist economics from Western economics?
2. Explain the difference between normative (or constructivist) approaches to Buddhist economics and descriptive (or exegetical) approaches.
3. Has Buddhism ever been economically disengaged? Should it be?
4. What implications would the adoption of Buddhist economics have at a global level?
5. Why did Schumacher think that 'small is beautiful'? Was he right?
6. Can Buddhist economics provide a 'middle way' between capitalism and socialism?
7. How can Buddhism convince poorer people to adopt its green agenda?

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Chapter Six
Human Rights

In this chapter

Engaged Buddhists typically voice strong support for human rights, but not everyone is persuaded that Western concepts like 'rights' are compatible with Buddhist teachings. While globalization has weakened claims that 'Asian values' are radically distinctive, the suspicion lingers that human rights are a Trojan horse for hegemonic Western values. Fears are also expressed that the individualism implicit in 'rights' promotes egocentricity and conflict rather than selflessness and social cohesion. We first explore the conceptual compatibility of human rights with Buddhist teachings, before considering some proposed doctrinal foundations for human rights. The chapter concludes by suggesting how these different proposals might be grounded in a teaching accepted by all schools, namely the Four Noble Truths.

The importance of human rights for Buddhism is evident from the attention the subject has received in recent decades. Leading engaged Buddhists from many Asian countries, such as the Dalai Lama (Tibet), A. T. Ariyaratne (Sri Lanka), Mahā Ghosānanda (Cambodia), and Sulak Sivaraksa (Thailand), have expressed concerns about social and political issues on numerous occasions using the language of human rights. Institutions have been established by Buddhists to defend and promote human rights. These include the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights, the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, and the Thai National Human Rights Commission. Several Asian countries with large Buddhist populations (Thailand, Myanmar, Lao, Cambodia, and Vietnam) are also members of the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) founded in 2009.

The human rights record of Buddhism itself, however, is not unblemished. Human rights abuses were recorded on both sides in the Sri Lankan civil war, and although hostilities ceased in 2009, harassment, intimidation, torture, exploitation, and violence by Buddhists have continued, including attacks on Muslim and Christian minorities, as mentioned in Chapter Four. In Myanmar, Buddhist factions have mounted pogroms against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State, and in Japan and China, Buddhism has colluded with state institutions of repression and control (Shiotsu and Gebert 1999; Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer 2010, 123). One of the most prominent Buddhist campaigners for human rights, the current Dalai Lama, has himself been charged with denying religious freedom in the so-called 'Shugden controversy' (Mills 2003). Buddhism has also been accused of failing to protect the rights of women (Tsedroen 2010; Suwanna Satha-Anand 1999).

Documenting the Buddhist record on human rights, however, is not our main concern, and our focus will be on the concept of human rights and its relation to Buddhist doctrine and ethics. Discussions of this kind often begin by describing a paradox, which philosopher Christopher Gowans formulates in the following terms: 'It is widely acknowledged that human rights were not explicitly recognized or endorsed in traditional Buddhist texts . . . And yet human rights are endorsed and advocated by most (although not all) engaged Buddhists today' (2015, 245). Taking this paradox as our starting point, our task is to survey the intellectual bridgework which must be put in place if human rights are to be given an authentic grounding in Buddhist doctrine. An important first step is to ask if the concept of 'rights' is intelligible in Buddhism, and, if so, whether appeals to human rights are consistent with Buddhist values. This will be the focus of the first part of the chapter. The second will review possible foundations for human rights in Buddhist teachings.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

The antecedents of today's human rights were spoken of as 'natural' rights, in other words, rights which flow from human nature. From the seventeenth century onwards, philosophers and statesmen began to define these rights and enshrine them in constitutions, declarations, charters, and manifestos in a tradition which has continued into modern times. The most well-known modern charter of human rights is *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948. Subsequent instruments have been enacted to address specific problems such as discrimination (for example, on grounds of race and gender) and to uphold the rights of particular groups (such as children, migrant workers, the disabled, and indigenous peoples).

These various 'generations' of human rights initiatives (Montgomery 1986, 69f) collectively secure a broad range of rights and freedoms, which while difficult to classify neatly may be thought of as falling into five main areas (Glendon 2001, 174): 1) rights of the person (e.g. life, liberty, and freedom of religion); 2) rights before the law (e.g. equality before the law and the right to a fair trial); 3) political rights (e.g. freedom of assembly and the right to vote); 4) economic and social rights (e.g. social security and employment rights); and 5) the rights of communities and groups (e.g. protection against genocide, and the rights of children). The Human Rights Council, a 47-member body inaugurated in 2006 with its headquarters in Geneva, is charged, under the supervision of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, with reviewing the compliance of member states with their human rights obligations.

Foundations

The nature, scope, and foundations of the rights just described are contested, but the main philosophical approaches may be identified briefly. *Naturalists* hold that human rights are an expansion of the 'natural rights' said to be

enjoyed by human beings 'as such' or 'simply in view of their humanity'. Naturalist conceptions have been termed *foundationalist* since they understand human rights as the expression of an underlying and independent order of moral values, in some sense innate in human nature.

Anti-foundationalists by contrast, support the aims of human rights but deny that any objective foundation for them exists. Instead, they seek to justify respect for human rights on a contextual basis emphasizing 'contingency, construction, and relativity' (Freeman 1994, 511) and attach particular importance to the role of the sentiments. *Sceptics*, for their part, attack belief in human rights in various ways. Some dismiss them as mere fictions like 'witches' and 'unicorns' (MacIntyre 1981, 69), while others claim they are vacuous on the grounds there is no agency or mechanism directly responsible for their enforcement. Sceptics who are *relativists* deny that human rights can be universal given the empirical diversity of cultures and moral values.

Perhaps understandably in the face of these conflicting opinions, *agreement conceptions* of human rights have become popular. Here, diversity is acknowledged, and philosophical differences bracketed in order to reach agreement on 'a set of important overlapping moral expectations to which different cultures hold themselves and other accountable' (Twiss 1998, 31).

We will meet examples of some of these positions in the second half of the chapter, but for now we consider what attitude Buddhism should adopt towards human rights and the institutions which seek to promote them as international norms. Some counsel caution and raise objections of two kinds—cultural and conceptual—to Buddhism becoming too closely associated with the human rights movement.

Cultural objections

An initial objection concerns the alien cultural origins of human rights. It cannot be denied, as Peter Junger notes, that the concept of human rights is 'a product of the traditions of Western Europe and the parochial histories of that region' (1998, 56). As Sobisch and Brox observe, much scepticism towards documents such as the UDHR 'stems from the assumption that universalism equals imperialism, in the sense that societies are forced to conform to ethnocentric ideas, disregarding or even denying cultural differences' (2010, 161).

In the 1990s, the political leaders of several Asian states (notably Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore, with strong backing from China) began to criticize the idea of human rights on grounds of its Western intellectual genealogy (Langlois 2001). According to them, talk of human rights promotes individualism in contrast to 'Asian values' which are said to be more community-oriented

(Narayan 1993). It was also claimed that human rights are a luxury that less developed countries cannot afford, and that economic development should remain the priority.

In some cases, it was hard not to see this 'cultural critique' (Amartya Sen's term) as a smokescreen to conceal the poor human rights record of certain Asian and Middle Eastern countries. Sen has challenged the view that there is anything specifically 'Asian' about such values (1997), and the Dalai Lama has also repudiated the view that human rights 'cannot be applied to Asia and other parts of the Third World because of differences in culture and differences in social and economic development' (Keown et al 1998, xviii).

Simon Caney (2001) offers Theravāda Buddhism as an example of how non-Western ethical traditions can embrace human rights, while Harding comments with respect to Thailand, 'I see no reason to deny the validity of attempts by the state to explain human rights in Buddhist terms' (2007, 20). As Schmidt-Leukel points out, however, there remains the question of the appropriate balance between 'Asian values' and 'Western Liberalism' (2010, 59). Too much emphasis on collectivism can stunt the development of individuality, whereas a one-sided stress on individual rights may fail to nurture a sense of community and social responsibility. Clearly, a 'middle way' is desirable.

Conceptual objections

In modern times the vocabulary of rights has become the *lingua franca* of political and ethical discourse. In contrast to the ubiquitous references to rights in today's globalized world, however, there appears to be no term in any canonical Buddhist language which conveys the idea of a right understood as a subjective entitlement. Masao Abe writes 'the exact equivalent of the phrase "human rights" in the Western sense cannot be found anywhere in Buddhist literature' (quoted in Traer 1995, 9 n.11).

The absence of a specific reference to rights need not mean, however, that Buddhism *opposes* the idea. Alan Gewirth has argued that 'persons might have and use the concept of a right without explicitly having a single word for it' (Dagger 1989, 286). Andrew Clapham suggests that 'Religious texts like the Bible and the Koran can be read as creating not only duties but rights', and believes that concerns with regard to 'self-fulfilment, respect for others, and the quest to contribute to others' well-being are evident in Confucian, Hindu and Buddhist traditions' (2007, 5). It seems clear, at least, that Buddhism acknowledges the existence of reciprocal *duties*. With respect to social justice the Rev. Vajiragnana comments:

> Each one of us has a role to play in sustaining and promoting social justice and orderliness. The Buddha explained very clearly these roles as reciprocal duties existing between parents and children; teachers

> and pupils; husband and wife; friends, relatives and neighbors; employer and employee; clergy and laity . . . No one has been left out. The duties explained here are reciprocal and are considered as sacred duties, for—if observed—they can create a just, peaceful and harmonious society. (1992)

The author apparently has in mind the *Sigālaka Sutta* (DN 31) we discussed in Chapter One in which the Buddha describes a set of six reciprocal social duties in a manner reminiscent of Confucius's Five Great Relationships (King 2001, 185f). It does not seem unreasonable when analysing these relationships from the beneficiary's perspective to employ the vocabulary of rights. Thus, parents have duties to their children, and children have a right to support, nurture, education, and protection from their parents. On this basis the distinction between rights and duties amounts to little more than a heuristic shift of perspective. As Hesanmi notes, 'Rather than erecting a false dichotomy between "rights" and "duty" what seems more reasonable is to affirm their correlativeness and mutual entailment' (2008, 504).

Paul Lauren recalls Gandhi's observation that 'The true source of rights is duty', adding that 'ideas about human duties, or what one is due to do, led quite naturally to ideas about human rights, or what is due to one' (2011, 11). On this basis it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that despite the limitations of the classical Buddhist lexicon rights can be accommodated in Buddhist teachings. Even if a conceptual foundation exists, however, it does not follow that the adoption and promotion of the concept of rights is innately desirable. Indeed, in the view of some commentators, the very idea of rights conflicts with Buddhism's metaphysics and soteriology.

Metaphysics

Concern arises here in relation to the doctrine of 'no-self' (*anattā*). If there is ultimately no self, the argument goes, then who, or what, is the bearer of the rights in question? Christopher Kelley describes this as 'the paradox of the inherent dignity of empty persons' (2015, 3). Human rights *naturalists*, as we saw earlier, seek to ground human dignity in some notion of an *a priori* human nature, but Kelley suggests such notions presuppose belief in inherent existence and hence are 'essentially incompatible with the most fundamental idea in Buddhism—the theory of no-self' (2015, 13).

Sallie King, however, describes objections of this kind as a 'red herring' (2005, 128), pointing out that Buddhist ethics functions perfectly well in many contexts without assuming the existence of a permanent self. The doctrine of no-self (*anattā*) involves only the denial of a transcendental self, not of a phenomenal, empirical self. It does not deny the existence of individuals with unique self-shaped identities, and if such identities provide an ontological foundation stable enough for the attribution of duties, as the Buddha clearly believed, presumably they also do for rights.

As Lauren Leve points out in the context of Buddhism in Nepal, the doctrine of no-self does not seem to inhibit Buddhists who claim the *protection* of human rights charters. She notes 'when Buddhists insist that national Hinduism violates their human rights to religious equality, they represent themselves as particular types of persons and political subjects' (2007, 98). She mentions the example of a senior Theravāda meditation teacher, noting that 'neither he nor his many students seemed to have any problem combining an anti-essentialist understanding of the self with the call for secular human rights and its implied identity' (2007, 105). Buddhist nationalists in countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Tibet, furthermore, rely on an ethnicised Buddhist religious identity as the basis of their political demands. It would thus appear that many Buddhists do not see the no-self doctrine as incompatible with ontologies of agency and identity. We will return to this topic later when we consider specific anti-foundationalist proposals.

Soteriology

The soteriological objection claims that the individualism implicit in rights is detrimental to both spiritual progress and social stability because it strengthens the ego and encourages selfish attitudes. Payutto observes that Western notions of rights involve 'competition, mistrust and fear'. Human rights, he notes, 'must be obtained through demand' (quote in Seeger 2010, 82f). Saneh Chamarik, one-time chair of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, echoes Payutto's concerns when he states, 'what really obstructs the attainment of freedom is not so much the social and conventional "chains" or restrictions, as one's own ego and the three poisons: lust, hatred, and delusion' (quoted in Seeger 2010, 91). In response, it might be pointed out that injustice, repression, and discrimination also give rise to negative states of mind, and that by enabling recourse to justice human rights provide a way of dispelling these mental defilements and removing the conditions that give rise to them.

Views expressed by the Dalai Lama form a striking contrast to those of Buddhadasa. He has stated 'It is natural and just for nations, peoples, and individuals to demand respect for their rights and freedoms and to struggle to end repression, racism, economic exploitation, military occupation, and various forms of colonialism and alien domination' (quoted in King 2005, 156). While it is true that rights are sometimes claimed for selfish reasons, they can also protect common interests. The right to freedom of association (UDHR article 20.i), for example, is hardly individualistic, and as King points out, when the Dalai Lama calls for respect for human rights, such as freedom of religion, he often does so in the name of the people of Tibet (2005, 136).

Buddhist foundations for human rights

Contrasting with the critiques considered so far are more affirmative approaches of the kind to be considered below. The more ambitious of these claim that human rights doctrines are completely foreshadowed in Buddhist teachings, while others emphasize particular Buddhist doctrines as possible bridgeheads between the Dharma and human rights.

Agreement conceptions

Human rights declarations rarely offer a detailed justification for the rights they proclaim. This leaves scope, as Sumner Twiss has observed, for a range of theoretical underpinnings (1998). Charles Taylor has spoken of an 'unforced consensus' on human rights suggesting there are different paths to human rights norms (1999), and others have made reference to 'structural equivalents' or 'multiple foundations' which allow consensus to be reached in the face of pluralist cultural and philosophical perspectives (Donnelly 2013). Drawing on the Thai experience, Andrew Harding endorses this approach, observing that in a 'postmodern, multi-culturalist world of international human rights', '*we do better to try to agree on the content of human rights rather than on the justification for their observance*' (2007, 21 original emphasis).

The UDHR was an agreement that sought to express common aspirations through the medium of Enlightenment values without professing theological or philosophical unanimity. As Jacques Maritain famously reported, it was an agreement about rights '*on condition that no-one asks us why*' (Beitz 2009, 21 original emphasis). In this sense declarations like the UDHR, given their wide and ambitious scope, can be seen as political manifestos or gestures of social responsibility on the part of world governments. The 'manifesto rights' (Feinberg 1973, 67) they proclaim, accordingly, do not create legal entitlements. Understood in this way, the objections mentioned previously to Buddhism endorsing 'rights' lose much of their force: the question becomes simply whether Buddhism can in good conscience sign up to the values enshrined in the proposed manifesto.

The main attraction of agreement conceptions is that they acknowledge moral diversity and avoid the charge of paternalism. The main drawback is that they give up any claim to ground human rights in universal moral values (Beitz 2009, ch.4; Schaefer 2005, 48–50). A problem here is that a consensus that circumvents deep philosophical differences may be superficial, and any agreement that can command universal assent is likely to be 'minimalist' and 'thin' (Ignatieff et al. 2003, 56). As James Nickel notes, it is doubtful whether 'there is sufficient agreement worldwide to support anything like the full range of rights declared in contemporary manifestos' (Freeman 1994, 493). Some Buddhists, moreover, may find it difficult to participate in a consensus which specifies rights as axioms (as opposed to conclusions from moral premises) without compromising traditional beliefs. They may

point out, for example, that when the mythical universal ruler (*Cakkavatti*) spreads the Dhamma to the four quarters of the globe he does so not by first negotiating with local rulers as to which aspects of the Dhamma are acceptable and compromising on those that are not. Rather, the local rulers accept the Dhamma in its entirety because they recognize its validity as a universal norm (DN iii.62).

Perera

One commentator finds the UDHR, at least, in harmony with early Buddhist teachings both in letter and in spirit. Professor Perera, a Sri Lankan scholar, has helpfully provided a commentary on each of the thirty articles of the UDHR aiming to demonstrate as much. In his Foreword to the commentary Ananda Gurugé writes: 'Professor Perera demonstrates that every single Article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights—even the labour rights to fair wages, leisure and welfare—has been adumbrated, cogently upheld and meaningfully incorporated in an overall view of life and society by the Buddha' (Perera 1991, xi).

Perera makes a promising suggestion for a basis for human rights in his commentary on Article 1.52 of the UDHR ('All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights'). In discussing the first sentence of the Article he comments that 'Buddhahood itself is within the reach of all human beings . . . and if all could attain Buddhahood what greater equality in dignity and rights can there be?' He expands on this in a remark toward the end of his commentary on Article 1: 'It is from the point of view of its goal that Buddhism evaluates all action. Hence Buddhist thought is in accord with this and other Articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the extent to which they facilitate the advancement of human beings toward the Buddhist goal' (Perera 1991, 24). The connection made here between Buddhahood, human dignity, and human rights, is also affirmed by others, as we shall see below.

Buddhist precepts

Several commentators, including the present author (Keown 1998), have suggested that the Buddhist precepts, especially those which prohibit causing harm to others, provide a foundation for human rights on the basis of the reciprocal understanding of rights and duties discussed previously. Thus, when the precepts are broken, someone's rights are infringed. Somparn Promta (1994) has argued that the Five Precepts protect human rights, and as such the first precept can be seen as an expression of the right to life (or more specifically the right not to be killed unjustly). In the same way Micheline Ishay notes 'With the exception of adultery, the gist of these injunctions is reflected in the very first clauses of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which praise the spirit of brotherhood and the right to life, liberty, and the security of one's person' (2008, 30). Sallie King reports

that senior Cambodian monks have expressed the view that human rights are 'the same as *sel pram* [the Five Lay Precepts]' (2005, 139). King herself has observed how:

> [T]he precepts imply that that society will be Good in which its members do not harm each other, steal from each other, lie to each other, etc. This in turn implies that a member of a Good society should have a reasonable expectation not to be harmed, stolen from, etc. Now one may or may not want to call such a thing a 'right', but it is certainly closing in on that ground in a practical sense, if not in the full conceptual sense (2005, 144).

Most societies have rules protecting human life, prohibiting theft and lying, and governing sexual relationships. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Buddhist precepts coincide with the core concerns of human rights charters. In respecting the precepts, one promotes the good of both self and others and so acts for the benefit of society at large. This seems to coincide with the goal of human rights. As Sevilla notes, 'we must participate in the realization of the Buddha-nature possessed not only by ourselves but shared with others, by upholding the rights of others' (2010, 249). On this basis the justification for keeping the precepts is deontological and grounded in respect for the common good.

Dependent origination

Kenneth Inada has proposed a specific foundation for human rights in Buddhist metaphysics. In a discussion of 'The Buddhist Perspective on Human Rights,' Inada suggests 'there is an intimate and vital relationship of the Buddhist norm or Dhamma with that of human rights' (1982). He explains 'The reason for assigning human nature the basic position is very simple. It is to give human relations a firm grounding in the truly existential nature of things: that is, the concrete and dynamic relational nature of persons in contact with each other' (1982, 70).

Here Inada seems to suggest it is in the *interrelatedness* of persons that the justification for human rights is to be found. This is confirmed when he observes 'Consequently, the Buddhist concern is focused on the experiential process of each individual, a process technically known as relational origination (*paṭicca-sammuppāda*)'. 'It is on this basis', he adds, that we can speak of the rights of individuals' (1982, 70f).

Demonstrations of interrelatedness in Buddhist literature often seem persuasive because they cite examples of parents, relatives, friends, teachers and loved ones who have shown kindness to us. But does the affection and respect we feel for such people arise solely from the metaphysical relationship we share with them? Perhaps not, since people do not feel the same way about every aspect of what Inada calls the 'mutually constituted existential realm' we inhabit. Children who are trafficked have an interdependent relationship

with their traffickers, but the well-being of children in such situations depends on *severing* the interdependent relationship in question. The bare fact of interdependence, therefore, is an unpromising basis for human rights. It seems a *moral* foundation is needed rather than a metaphysical one.

Compassion

Perhaps compassion can meet this requirement. The Buddhist virtue of compassion (*karuṇā*) encourages us to develop the human capacity for empathy to the point where we can identify fully with the suffering of others. Some texts, for example the eighth chapter of the *Bodhicāryavatāra*, speak of 'exchanging self and other' and recommend a meditational practice in which we imaginatively place ourselves in the other's position. In the West, the view known as 'sentimentalism' has long emphasized the role of the emotions in moral judgments. From this perspective, the attribution of human rights is 'an expression of a deep human ability to recognize the other as like oneself; to experience empathy for the other's needs and sufferings; to consent to, support, and rejoice in the fulfilment of the other's human capacities and well-being' (Cahill 1999, 45).

Jay Garfield (1998) believes compassion can provide a moral grounding for the Dalai Lama's views on human rights. Garfield finds the influential liberal philosophy of rights unsatisfactory and proposes a form of virtue or character ethics in which 'the moral life is grounded in the cultivation and exercise of compassion' (1998, 111). On this understanding, compassion provides the moral bedrock on top of which 'an edifice of rights' is constructed 'as a device for extending the reach of natural compassion and for securing the goods that compassion enables to all persons in a society' (1998: 124). Rights thus become the 'tools with which each individual can protect him/herself and achieve his/her own flourishing'. 'These tools', Garfield adds, 'will be available even when our compassion or those [*sic*] of others fails, and can even be used as rhetorical vehicles to reawaken that compassion' (1998, 124).

A problem with making compassion the foundation for rights is that feelings are rarely impartial and can often change. While Buddhas and great bodhisattvas may feel compassion for all sentient beings, most ordinary mortals do not. Garfield believes that human rights will remain accessible even in the event of 'compassion fatigue' because the legal superstructure of rights will remain in place (1998, 126), but any weakening of the motivating foundation would surely reduce commitment to the rights founded upon it. The human rights abuses that occurred in the civil war in Sri Lanka suggest that the limits of Buddhist compassion are soon tested. Perhaps compassion can periodically be 'reawakened', but it seems to go against the grain of human rights thinking to suggest that individual A should have to awaken compassion in B to secure her human rights. And if compassion *cannot* be

reawakened, human rights will simply evaporate, along with the unconditional protection they are supposed to provide. On this understanding human rights clearly cannot be *inalienable*, as the UDHR proclaims in its Preamble and the Dalai Lama also appears to believe.

Rather than seeing rights as flowing from compassion, it may be more accurate to see compassion as the affective *response* of a virtuous person to the perception that the condition of beings falls short of what their dignity requires. On this understanding, compassion is the appropriate Buddhist response to injustice when society fails to give each his due as Dharma requires. Rights are then the juridical measures that reason (*paññā*) determines are necessary to redress and prospectively forestall such injustice. If Garfield's argument is reconstructed along these lines, rights enjoy a naturalist foundation in the capacity to attain 'supreme and perfect awakening', a state in which reason and compassion play mutually supportive roles.

The 'two truths'

An approach in some ways related to the previous one has been developed by Christopher Kelley (2015) in what appears to be the only full-length philosophical analysis of human rights from a Buddhist perspective, and one we cannot do justice to here. Kelly seeks to reconcile the Dalai Lama's ethics, specifically his often-voiced support for the Enlightenment concepts of inherent dignity and inalienable rights, with Madhyamaka metaphysics. The Dalai Lama has frequently spoken of a common human nature as the foundation for his humanitarian ethics and refers to 'fundamental principles that bind us all as members of the same human family' (Keown et al 1998, xix). As Kelley notes, he 'clearly supports a moral universalism based on our "shared humanity"' (2015, 91). This implies foundationalism, which Kelley believes conflicts with the anti-essentialist metaphysics of the Dalai Lama's Madhyamaka philosophy. Kelley's objective is to resolve the paradox and reach an 'unforced consensus' between these two positions by drawing on the notion of the 'two truths'. 'I contend', he writes, 'that this account of the two truths is how we can make sense of the paradox of the inherent dignity of empty persons' (2015, 30).

Kelley believes this strategy allows him to interpret the Dalai Lama's position on human rights in a manner 'consistent with the postmodern rejection of innate human rights and dignity espoused by contemporary "anti-foundationalist" thinkers like Richard Rorty' (2015, 2). On this anti-foundationalist interpretation, feelings of sympathy are thought to lead to an emotional identification or 'mirroring' which gives rise to moral concern, manifesting itself as respect for other individuals and their rights. 'Such empathetic feelings,' says Kelley, 'invariably lead one to behave in a [way] that is congruent with the moral principles associated with the various human rights' (2015, 141). Thus, while rights are devoid of intrinsic nature they

can, Kelley suggests, be said to have 'meaning and significance' in terms of a 'particular veridical framework' (2015, 30) or 'symbolic system' (2015, 36) such as that of the UNDR. The metaphysics of Dialectical Centricism (Madhyamaka) are thereby seen as supporting a form of moral particularism, where in any given case 'The morally right response would have to be relative to the individual agent's unique set of circumstances' (2015, 164).

As with our earlier discussion of the compatibility of rights with the doctrine of no-self, some may wonder whether 'the inherent dignity of empty persons' involves a genuine paradox. It seems a paradox would only arise if 'inherent dignity' is understood in the sense of 'inherently existing dignity', in other words a dignity that in Madhyamaka terms possesses 'own-being' (*svabhāva*) and exists 'from its own side'. Foundationalists, however, do not (and certainly need not) claim this. They assert only that inherent dignity (and inalienable rights) exist in the way other entities in the world exist, in other words as enjoying what Kelley describes as 'conventional intrinsic existence' (2015, 33). On this basis, the Dalai Lama's moral universalism seems compatible with human rights foundationalism, which, it might be thought, provides the most intuitive interpretation of his views.

Buddha nature

An overtly foundationalist suggestion is that Buddha-nature can provide the required basis for human rights. Anton Sevilla has suggested 'the fact that all beings have a common essence of Buddha-nature brings an inescapable sense of solidarity to the ethical task of Mahāyāna Buddhism.' 'The ethical demand to realize Buddha-nature', furthermore, 'is something we do with and for the community of sentient beings as a whole' (2010, 227). The manifestation of Buddha-nature is not a once-and-for all event so much as a dynamic unfolding through continuous practice. Dōgen calls this the doctrine of 'The Oneness of Practice and Attainment' (*shushōittō*). Sevilla notes that 'practice is the very condition that manifests and expresses our Buddha-nature and our fundamental human goodness' (2010, 234), and sums up the relevance of Dogen's insights for ethics and human rights as follows:

> The traditional idea of Buddha-nature and its realization shows that this ethical path is one of solidarity and compassion with all sentient beings, where we see our struggle in *saṃsāra* as shared and our liberation through Buddha-nature as liberation for all. It was upon this idea that we grounded the need for rights and the importance of rights for both one's own emancipation and that of others (2010, 248).

The rights that issue from this understanding are said to have two characteristics. First, they will be 'grounded in a genuine sense of solidarity with human beings on the deepest ground of our shared struggle'; and second, they will be based 'not on a presumed human nature on which other people may or may not agree but rather on a historical response to the actual suffering of people and in solidarity with their struggle' (2010, 248). Sevilla is wise to

avoid basing human rights on a specific conception of human nature given the variety of inconsistent views about how it is to be defined. A better candidate is human well-being, a possibility adumbrated in the reference to suffering and struggle. What such struggle involves is overcoming obstacles that stand in the way of well-being, and since there is general agreement on what the obstacles are (tyranny, injustice, discrimination, and other abuses catalogued in human rights charters) it should be easier to reach agreement on the core values that structure well-being.

Dōgen's conception of human good, as Sevilla explains it, has much in common with Aristotelian conceptions of human flourishing as the progressive unfolding of potential through the cultivation of virtues (Nussbaum 1997). Thus, 'realizing one's Buddha-nature requires that we possess the rights and liberties necessary for us to pursue spiritually meaningful lives' (Sevilla 2010, 249). Human rights are thus the legal means by which moral theory is translated into normative practice. As Sevilla comments, 'Rights can be seen as institutional means for upholding certain general forms of right conduct' (2010, 222), and 'the ethical demand to realize Buddha-nature is something we do with and for the community of sentient beings as a whole' (2010, 227). In contrast to anti-foundationalism, such rights are seen as innate entitlements having an ontological foundation in the radical capacity of all beings to attain Buddhahood.

Buddha-nature has many attractions as a foundation for human rights. It grounds rights in human good; it explains why rights are inalienable and universal; it provides a Buddhist equivalent for 'human dignity'; and it can also encompass non-human forms of life (since dignity is a rank of being rather than an absolute state, different forms of life will have rights appropriate to their natures). As a formal doctrine, however, it is sectarian, and is understood differently among Mahāyāna schools. Some, like the Madhyamaka, may even wish to challenge its essentialist presuppositions. The concept of 'Buddha-nature' is also unknown in early Buddhism, although having antecedents in the belief that all beings have the capacity to attain awakening, as noted by Perera.

Conclusion

The modern idea of human rights has a distinctive cultural origin, but its underlying preoccupation with well-being is one Buddhism shares. Human rights can be seen as an explication of what is 'due' under Dharma and hence an authentic expression of Buddhist teachings. Each of the proposals discussed above finds a resonance between human rights and specific teachings. In this sense perhaps we should speak of multiple foundations for human rights. Yet focusing on individual teachings may be unnecessarily divisive: approaches which emphasize compassion, for example, have little to say about wisdom. It might be thought that a successful foundation for human rights should be

comprehensive, as well as rooted in the core teachings of Buddhism accepted by all schools. It would thus seem desirable for any proposed foundation to meet the criteria formulated by Evans namely: 1) Simplicity: ordinary Buddhists must be able to understand the argument; 2) Universality: it must be based on principles that all Buddhists accept; 3) Authority or dignity: the theory must articulate the moral inviolability, or its equivalent, of the human person; 4) It must integrate Buddhist 'resignation' (acceptance of the reality of suffering) with human rights advocacy (1998, 141).

Perhaps the most basic Buddhist doctrine of all—the Four Noble Truths—can meet these requirements. All Buddhist schools affirm the account of human nature and its fulfilment set out in the Four Noble Truths, and all the approaches considered have their foundation in some aspect or other of this teaching. The precepts form part of the Fourth Noble Truth (under the category of *sīla* or 'morality'), and the doctrine of dependent origination, especially in its soteriological form, is associated with the second (the arising of suffering). The innate capacity for awakening (or 'Buddha nature') is affirmed in the Third Noble Truth. Universal compassion arises from an unrestricted sensitivity to human suffering, described in the First Noble Truth, and is the virtue that motivated the Buddha to teach the four truths (SN i.136). An interpretation along these lines seems to meet the conditions Evans describes regarding simplicity, universality, authority, and authenticity. On this basis, the rights proclaimed by the UDHR and similar documents can be understood as facilitating the liberation from suffering and the achievement of self-realisation proclaimed in the Four Noble Truths.

Incorporating human rights more formally within Buddhism, however, will require some doctrinal expansion and reconfiguration. As we saw in our discussion of politics in Chapter Three, Buddhism has not provided much in the way of theoretical accounts of the relationship between the individual and society. Early Buddhism teaches a path to liberation though self-development and offers the *saṅgha* as the community in which this task can best be carried out. Mahāyāna Buddhism believes that bodhisattvas will take upon themselves the responsibility for universal liberation. Little is said in the classical sources, at least, about the responsibilities of the broader political community and the social structures required to facilitate the common good, a subject with which human rights are centrally concerned. Buddhism now faces the challenge of discovering 'resources for fresh elaboration' (Cohen 2004, 213) so that its political and social teachings can evolve in response to new circumstances while remaining faithful to doctrinal foundations.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Engaged Buddhist leaders express strong support for human rights, but others point to the absence of a concept of rights in Buddhist teachings and are suspicious of its Western origins. Buddhist organisations today work to promote human rights, but Buddhism's own record is not unblemished.
- The most well-known modern charter of human rights is *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948.
- *Foundationalists* believe that human rights rest on an objective moral order. *Anti-foundationalists* believe human rights are cultural constructs. *Sceptics* deny there is any such thing as human rights. *Relativists* believe there cannot be universal human rights because of the diversity of human cultures.
- Critics suggest Buddhists believe teachings like no-self and emptiness present *metaphysical* obstacles to the concept of rights. Others raise *soteriological* objections, such as that rights promote egoism and hinder spiritual development.
- Supporters propose different foundations for rights in Buddhist teachings, such as the precepts, dependent-origination, compassion, and Buddha-nature. Others propose an anti-foundationalist interpretation based on Madhyamaka philosophy.
- There is no agreement as to a philosophical foundation for human rights in Buddhism, but it seems desirable that any proposed foundation should be acceptable to all Buddhist schools. The Four Noble Truths are one possible foundation.

Discussion questions

1. Does the fact that there is no word for 'rights' in canonical Buddhist languages mean the concept of rights has no place in Buddhist teachings?
2. Why might Buddhists be suspicious of the idea of human rights?
3. If there is no self, who do human rights belong to?
4. What foundations can you see in Buddhist teachings for the idea of human rights?
5. If engaged Buddhism supports human rights, should disengaged Buddhism oppose them?

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Chapter Seven
Animals

In this chapter

The Buddhist attitude to animals is shaped to a great extent by three basic teachings: non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and karma. The principle of *ahiṃsā* extends moral protection to the animal kingdom, while compassion provides the impulse to ameliorate the material condition of animals and reduce their suffering. The belief in karma, which entails that humans can be reborn as animals, and vice versa, gives a distinctive Buddhist perspective on the relationship between species. Despite these common beliefs, there is variation in practice in the treatment of animals across the Buddhist world, and little consensus on contemporary ethical questions like animal rights, vegetarianism, 'speciesism', and the use of animals for scientific research. Following a review of Buddhist attitude to animals as disclosed in primary sources, we address a number of these issues. In the next chapter we will consider the position of inanimate nature.

Introduction

As Peter Harvey notes, 'Rather than divide the world into the realms of the "human" and "nature", the classical Buddhist perspective has seen a more appropriate division as that between sentient beings, of which humans are only one type, and the non-sentient environment, the "receptacle-world" (*bhājana loka*)' (Harvey 2000, 151). In this chapter we address questions relating to the first of these categories, the world of sentient beings, and in the next chapter we consider the non-sentient environment or 'receptable world'.

In approaching this topic, the reader will do well to heed the salutary advice of Paul Waldau, who has written extensively on the matter.

> On the diverse and morally fraught issue of 'other animals', then, considerable care must be taken when claiming any kind of unanimity for Buddhists. With care, however, it can be argued that there is agreement of a kind on the significance that individuals of other species have in the minds of Buddhists, for even the casual observer quickly learns that this tradition promotes a profound commitment to the primacy of ethical reflection in human life, and thus *the lives of nonhumans matter to anyone who considers herself to be a moral being*. (2018, 672 original emphasis)

There are two points to note here. The first is that few valid generalizations can be made about the views of *all* Buddhists on the question of animals. As we shall see, for example, there is considerable disagreement on the question

of vegetarianism, and the treatment of animals varies among the Buddhist cultures of Asia. It is therefore difficult to generalize about Buddhist attitudes and sometimes even to reconcile views expressed within a single school.

The second point is that despite these problems, Buddhists almost universally believe that animals fall within the scope of moral concern, often to a greater extent than other religions. It can be claimed with reasonable confidence that 'few human communities, if any, have done so more impressively than have Buddhists, even though the tradition began at a time of limited awareness of the details of the lives of nonhuman neighbours who share ecological and geographical space with the human community' (Waldau 2018, 654).

Buddhist attitudes antedate by thousands of years the contemporary global movement originating in the 1970s that goes by names such as 'animal protection,' 'animal rights,', 'animal welfare,' 'anticruelty,' and 'animal liberation.' Following Waldau, we will adopt the term 'animal rights' as a generic description of all of these movements, although they differ considerably in the conceptual foundations on which they base their support for animal welfare. While some seek simply to improve the welfare of animals and reduce suffering, others make the stronger claim that animals have moral and/or legal rights similar to human beings.

Most of these organizations direct their attention to pets and domesticated animals and few are concerned with the well-being of feral dogs, cats, foxes, and the like. It is therefore hard to escape the impression that a large part of the agenda of these movements is concerned more with human interests than that of the animals themselves, which are valued primarily as the property of their owners. Thus, as Waldau notes, 'the focus of animal protection organizations around the world remains, relative to the First Precept, strikingly narrow' (2018, 656).

While there may be truth in the view that Buddhism takes a generally benign attitude to the animal world, the idea that Buddhism is a natural ally of the animal rights and other activist movements requires qualification. There is no doubt that Buddhist literature contains many references to animals (Ohnuma 2017), but often these turn out to have little in common with the modern animal rights agenda. The sources generally adopt a human-centered perspective and reveal that Buddhists often acquiesced in harmful practices and were at times oblivious to the reality of animal existence. The liberation of human beings from suffering remains the primary focus of Buddhist teachings and in adopting what is in many respects an anthropocentric position (the view that value belongs to humans alone), the Buddhist view of animals may not be as unique as is sometimes supposed.

Buddhism, of course, is first and foremost a soteriology rather than an enquiry into biology or zoology, so its interest in animals for themselves is naturally limited. In scientific terms, the category 'animals' includes human

beings, and humans share the planet with up to ten, or perhaps as many as a hundred, million different species (Waldau 2018, 651). The majority of these are 'micro animals,' millions of which inhabit our bodies. Buddhist ethical teachings, however, are concerned primarily with domesticated non-human 'macro animals' such as dogs, cats, and elephants, because these are the animals with which human beings most regularly come into contact.

This is not to ignore wild animals completely, and jungle-dwelling hermits were very conscious of the danger these represented. It will be recalled that the Buddha gave his first sermon in a park inhabited by wild deer, and Buddhist texts express views on the hunting and trapping of such beasts. The category of 'animals' we are concerned with, then, includes animals reared for food, pets or 'companion animals,' wild animals, work animals, animals used for entertainment in circuses or marine parks, and animals used in scientific research (Waldau 2018, 650).

Karma and rebirth

What is distinctive about Buddhist teachings, at least in comparison with the West, is the belief that human beings can be reborn as animals, and vice versa. Arguably, this makes the scope of Buddhist concern wider than that of modern animal rights movements. Because of this belief, Buddhism can mitigate to some degree the charge of 'speciesism' (see below), in other words of unfairly giving one species (human beings) priority over others. In the Buddhist description of *saṃsāra*, or the continuing cycle of rebirth, six realms, or *gati*s, are enumerated. These are hell, the animal realm, the ghostly world, the titans, human beings, and the heavenly realm (DN iii.264). Often represented in the 'wheel of life' (*bhavacakka*), three of these realms—namely the animal world, hungry ghosts, and hell—are classified as 'unfortunate' and three (namely the human world, the titans, and gods) as 'fortunate.' In this schema, it is clearly preferable to be born as a human rather than an animal. At the same time, there is a constant movement of beings within the different realms and no stage of existence is permanent.

In the above sixfold scheme, a 'precious human rebirth' is given even greater prestige than rebirth among the gods and is regarded as the most auspicious of the six realms from which to attain liberation. This is because whereas the gods are largely occupied in the passive enjoyment of karmic rewards, human beings have the ability, opportunity, and motivation to exercise free will and moral agency. Birth as a human being is seen as a rare and precious opportunity and is believed to have the same chance of occurring as a blind sea-turtle that surfaces only once in a hundred years putting its head through a small yoke floating on the surface of the ocean (MN iii.169).

This endorsement of human superiority is evident in the *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta*, where it is said of the animal realm: 'There is no practising of the Dhamma, no practising of what is righteous, no doing of what is wholesome, no performance of merit. There mutual devouring prevails, and the slaughter of the weak' (MN iii.169). The Vinaya reports how at one time a Nāga transformed himself into a human being to join the *saṅgha* (Vin i.86). The Buddha uncovered his disguise and expelled him stating that serpents were unable to progress in the Dhamma and Vinaya because animals cannot understand the Dhamma or practice meditation. He did, however, allow that the Nāga could participate in religious ceremonies. Although animals cannot progress in the Dhamma, then, they can at least expunge the bad karma that led them to an animal rebirth by 'serving out their time' with good behaviour rather than incurring further penalties.

Even if humans have a unique value, however, it does not follow that *only* humans deserve moral respect: a hierarchical structure suggests a graduated scheme of value rather than a purely anthropocentric one. While Buddhism does not regard animals and humans as equal in all ways, it does regard them as similar in one very important respect, namely in their ability to suffer. Whether or not animals can meditate or understand Buddhist teachings, their sentiency is arguably enough to bring them without the scope of moral concern and at a minimum justify their interests being taken into account.

Buddhist attitudes to animals

A visitor to any Buddhist country will see many examples of spontaneous kindness towards animals. A custom common in many Buddhist countries is that of 'releasing life' (Chinese *fang sheng),* a practice whereby animals kept in captivity are released upon payment of a small fee (Shiu and Stokes 2008). Typically, small birds are set free from their cages, and it is believed that merit is gained by the donor for this act of kindness. There is no reason to think that such practices are a modern development, and the earliest Buddhist sources reveal a concern for animal welfare. For example, a categorical ban is imposed on hunting, butchering, and similar professions:

> What kind of a person, bhikkhus, torments others and pursues the practice of torturing others? Here a certain person is a butcher of sheep, a butcher of pigs, a fowler, a trapper of wild beasts, a hunter, a fisherman, a thief, an executioner, a prison warden, or one who follows any other bloody occupation. This is called the kind of person who torments others and pursues the practice of torturing others. (MN i.343)

The slaughter of animals brings unfortunate consequences for both slayer and slain. A passage in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* narrates how a former butcher of poultry is reborn as a lump of meat and tormented by birds; a former butcher of sheep is flayed alive, while a former butcher of pigs is repeatedly slashed with swords. A hunter of deer is pierced with arrows, and a former trainer of horses

is pricked with needles (SN 19.2). The nature of the karmic punishment here clearly mirrors the nature of the mistreatment, even to the extent of using the offender's own instruments. Elsewhere, the *Sutta Nipāta* states categorically:

> Having put down the rod toward all beings, toward those in the world
> both firm and frail, one should not kill living beings or cause to kill,
> nor should one approve of others who kill. (Sn v. 394)

The Buddha himself is portrayed as refraining from destroying life, and it is often stated that enlightened beings 'show kindness and live with compassion for the welfare of all living beings' (AN i.211). The *Potaliya Sutta* describes a range of unfortunate consequences that follow from harming animals both in this life and the next. Thus, 'I would blame myself for doing so; the wise, having investigated, would censure me for doing so; and on the dissolution of my body, after death, because of killing living beings an unhappy destination would be expected. But this killing of living beings is itself a fetter and a hindrance' (MN i.361). Abstaining from violence is a requirement of the Eightfold Path under the headings of Right Action and Right Livelihood. Right Action is said to include abandoning the taking of life (DN ii.312) and Right Livelihood forbids certain professions such as trade in flesh and weapons (AN iii.208). All the above directives clearly contribute to the protection of animals.

Also influential in defining ethical attitudes towards the natural world are the four *Brahma-vihāra*s mentioned in Chapter One. Referred to as the 'sublime attitudes', universal love (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) foster feelings that lead to the protection of the natural world and ensure its well-being. A truly compassionate person would find it hard to reconcile these sentiments with callous environmental damage and cruel blood sports. Though it becomes clear in the reading of Buddhist texts that the sublime attitudes are primarily prescribed for the spiritual advancement of the practitioner (SN ii.264) rather than for the benefit of the environment, it is also said that their practice gradually pervades the whole world. Although the natural world is not the direct object of these practices, then, it is at least an indirect beneficiary.

The Buddhist values of non-violence and compassion are evident in the Buddha's opposition to animal sacrifice. Animal sacrifices are severely criticized and alternative sacrifices using oil, butter, and molasses are praised (DN i.141). The Buddha, on hearing that a great sacrifice was being planned that would include the slaughter of several animals, stated that no great merit would be gained from such an action (SN i.75). He praised brahmins of ancient time for not sacrificing animals and refers to a sacrifice he himself conducted on behalf of a king. In this ancient sacrifice animals were not killed, nor were trees chopped down to make posts to tether the animals, and the offerings were restricted to inanimate objects like honey and butter (DN i.141).

Sparing the lives of animals is referred to as giving the 'gift of fearlessness' (*abhaya-dāna*), and there is a historical precedent for such this in the reforms introduced by emperor Aśoka. He prohibited the slaughter of animals on four days in each lunar month. On these days, fish could not be caught or sold, and animals could not be killed. He also renounced the sport of hunting and substituted pilgrimages for his previous hunting trips. He reports that he banned the killing of many species and gradually reduced the slaughter of animals in the royal kitchens (Nikam and McKeon 1978, 56). The Vinaya prohibits monks from consuming certain types of animal flesh, namely the flesh of horses, elephants, dogs, snakes, lions, tigers, panthers, bears, and hyenas (Vin 1.219f).

The Mahāyāna emphasis on the 'great compassion' (*mahā-karuṇā*) of bodhisattvas, and the Yogācāra notion of the 'embryonic Buddha' (*tathāgata-garbha*) which holds that the universal seed of Buddhahood is present in all living beings, including animals, further strengthen the ethical identification between human beings and the animal kingdom. In this context the famous story of the hungry tigress from the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* (*Sūtra* of Golden Light) is of interest. The story relates how the Buddha in a previous life came across a tigress and her cubs who were starving and near to death for lack of food. Moved by compassion, the Buddha demonstrated the perfection of generosity (*dāna*) by donating his own body to the animals for food. The *Brahmajāla Sūtra*, an influential code of monastic conduct in China, endorses this example, advising that bodhisattvas should sacrifice their flesh and limbs to feed starving animals and hungry ghosts.

Misunderstanding animal nature

Although evincing concern for their suffering, Buddhist sources show little interest in understanding the nature of animals. It is clear they are held to suffer pain, but beyond that their status is ambiguous. Sometimes animal birth is praised (MN i.341), but most commonly it is denounced as brutish and lowly (MN iii.169). Life as an animal is described by the Buddha in negative terms: 'I see that on the dissolution of the body, after death, [an immoral individual] has reappeared in the animal realm and is experiencing painful, racking, piercing feelings' (MN i.75). The *Bālapaṇḍita Sutta*, mentioned above, paints a negative picture of animal life, noting that some animals feed on grass, others feed on dung, while others still are 'born, age, and die in filth' (MN iii.169).

Buddhist literary sources often misrepresent the true reality of animal life. In some texts, animals are given characteristics they do not have, and their biological reality is made obscure. This can be seen in an example from the *Jātaka*s. The purpose of the *Jātaka* folktales is to impart moral lessons in the manner of Aesop's fables, but since animals and the natural world figure prominently in them, these tales are often quoted to demonstrate Buddhism's ecological credentials.

The *Anta Jātaka*, for instance, is a tale showing the evil of flattery and greed. It describes the actions of a crow and a jackal, depicting them as greedy beings that resort to deceitful flattery to get food (J.440–1). While the moral of the tale is salutary, the fact that animals are the main protagonists should not by itself be taken as evidence of Buddhist concern for animals. Quite the contrary, in fact, for in this case it universalizes the characteristics of greed and flattery as qualities shared by all members of the crow and jackal species. It categorically states in its accompanying verse that jackals are the lowest of all beasts and crows are the lowest of all birds. The anthropomorphic portrayal of these animals thus leads to a degradation of them that has little to do with ecological concern and may even undermine it.

Positive characteristics of animals

This random association of moral qualities with certain species shows that Buddhism has little curiosity or interest in the animals themselves and uses them merely to represent *human* virtues and vices. In this respect, the more admirable characteristics of particular animals are sometimes applied to the Buddha and his followers. For example, the Buddha is compared to a bull-elephant who wanders alone (AN iv.435–7). Elsewhere, he is likened to a bull elephant that leaves the herd and sets out alone to avoid the attentions of amorous female elephants (*Udāna* 4.5). The Buddha's claim to enlightenment is likened to a lion's roar (AN ii.33), and his well-trained disciples are said to be like thoroughbred horses (AN i.244–6).

Even though human beings are clearly regarded as superior, animals also possess certain admirable qualities. Elephants, for example, are portrayed as strong and independent, and lions as brave and noble leaders. Not infrequently it is hinted that animals are moral beings that have the capacity to produce good and bad karma, and the Buddha once commented that a jackal he heard howling one morning had more gratitude and thankfulness than a particular monk he knew (SN ii.272).

We see, then, that animals can described in different ways. Sometimes they are shown as noble and intelligent, and at other times as driven by violent instincts and passions. Such was the case with the raging bull-elephant Nālāgiri whose angry rampage was only calmed when the Buddha directed *mettā* towards it (Vin ii.194f). In the same way, the Buddha encouraged monks to extend loving-kindness to all animals and explained attacks by snakes as due to a failure of *mettā*.

Equality or hierarchy?

One of the most important questions for animal ethics has to do with which forms of life merit moral consideration. The Buddha was aware of the diversity of the animal world, stating, 'I do not see any other order of living beings as diverse as those of the animal kingdom' (SN iii.152). Nonetheless,

while animals were classified in various ways (such as legless, two-legged, four-legged, or multi-legged) (AN v.21) and by mode of birth (such as from a womb or an egg) (SN iii.240) there is no discussion of a hierarchy within the animal kingdom itself.

A point of some importance is how far down the chain of being our moral obligations extend. Early texts say that humans may be reborn as scorpions and centipedes (AN v.289), or even worms and maggots (MN iii.168). The first precept, as mentioned earlier, prohibits causing injury to living creatures, but the boundaries of the moral world are fuzzy at the lower echelons. I have suggested elsewhere that the concept of 'karmic life' can provide a principle of demarcation (Keown 2001, 46–49). By 'karmic life' is meant those forms of life that are sentient, reincarnate, and are morally autonomous. This would include human beings and the higher mammals, but at the lower levels of the evolutionary scale there would be a significant number of species with an ambiguous moral status.

On this criterion, the obligations of the first precept would not apply in the case of microscopic forms of life such as viruses and bacteria since these entities do not qualify as karmic life. They do not reincarnate and are simply functioning parts of an integral being rather than autonomous agents. A virus, for example, is not sentient (it lacks a central nervous system through which pain is experienced), it has no karmic history (it has not lived before) and being merely part of a larger organic whole is no more a moral agent than an arm or a leg. An implication of adopting the criterion of karmic life is that the greater part of the natural world—especially inanimate nature such as mountains, rivers, and lakes—would lack inherent moral value, although retaining instrumental value to the extent that it provides support for karmic life.

The fact that there is no discussion of a hierarchy within the animal kingdom itself or among the plant and animal kingdoms (Sciberras 2011) makes it difficult to address questions concerning conservation priorities and related issues that must be dealt with in modern ecology. Where there is competition between species for survival, for example, how are we to decide which species should be protected? For example, would Buddhism approve of a conservation measure that required the culling of some animals, even if such killing were to benefit others and ultimately preserve the balance of the natural world (James 2006)? If the population of a particular species grows too large, it can threaten the well-being of other species, and so its size may need to be reduced. Certain animals also carry disease that affects others. In the United Kingdom, badgers have been culled to reduce the spread of bovine tuberculosis to cattle and other farm animals (a strong opponent of the cull was Brian May, the guitarist of the rock group Queen), and similar culls have been carried out elsewhere.

The Mahāyāna response might introduce the concept of skilful means (*upāya–kauśalya*), which allows the precepts to be relaxed or broken to varying degrees by a bodhisattva when done selflessly and for the welfare and happiness of other beings. However, applying skilful means is a complicated matter and raises prior questions such as *why* the welfare of some species is to be considered more important than others on Buddhist principles. The commentator Buddhaghosa suggests at one point (MA i.189) that the larger the animal, the greater the 'demerit' in killing it. On this understanding, killing an elephant is more serious than killing a fly on account of the greater effort required (this principle is sometimes erroneously applied to abortion, as we will see in Chapter 10). However, this logic is not terribly helpful as a basis for the preservation of species, for sometimes it is more important to ensure the survival of endangered smaller species over their larger predators.

Even the practice of 'releasing life' (*fang sheng*) referred to above has come in for criticism from animal rights groups. According to the Humane Society International, the practice involves the capture of hundreds of millions of animals worldwide, wreaking havoc on local ecosystems. The animals are often released in unsuitable conditions and die (or are recaptured) soon afterwards. In 2015, followers of the Taiwanese Buddhist master Hai Tao released hundreds of alien lobsters and crabs into the sea off Brighton in the UK causing damage to marine life. Those responsible were fined heavily and ordered to pay compensation.

Speciesism

Just as 'racism' is discrimination on grounds of race, so 'speciesism' is discrimination on grounds of species. The term was popularized by the Australian philosopher and animal rights advocate, Peter Singer. In practice, 'speciesism' means unfairly treating the human species as morally more important and discriminating against other species.

Is Buddhism guilty of speciesism? Here we find a difference of opinion in the literature. Paul Waldau (2002) believes that Buddhism is speciesist while James Stewart (2010; 2018) and Colette Sciberras (2008) independently defend Buddhism against the charge. Waldau defines speciesism as 'the inclusion of all human animals within and the exclusion of all other animals from the moral circle' (2002, 38). He finds evidence of speciesism in many aspects of the Buddhist attitude to animals as described above. For example, while Buddhism is sympathetic to animals it teaches that a human rebirth is superior to an animal rebirth, suggesting that animals as a class are inferior to human beings. Furthermore, rebirth as an animal is seen as a punishment for past misdeeds, suggesting that animals are morally inferior. Thus, Waldau writes:

> Both the reincarnation and karma notions also reflect the important sense of discontinuity between humans and other animals that sustains the tradition's constant, dominant emphasis on the kind of achievement which mere membership in the human species is believed to be. (2002, 38)

Stewart's response to the charge of speciesism is to accept that Buddhism regards human life as superior to animal life but to deny that this inequality amounts to speciesism. Speciesism would only apply, he suggests, if animals were arbitrarily excluded from moral consideration. While animals lack the cognitive abilities necessary to attain liberation, and are different from humans in this respect, they share, as noted above, a very important feature with humans, namely the ability to suffer. It is the ability to suffer, Stewart believes, that makes them morally relevant and brings them within same 'moral circle' as human beings and other forms of sentient life. Indeed, as Sciberras points out (2008, 221), Buddhist sources extend the 'moral circle' to an almost infinite degree, as the following verses from the *Sutta Nipāta* make clear:

> Whatever living creatures there be,
> without exception, weak or strong,
> Long, huge or middle-sized,
> or short, minute or bulky,
> Whether visible or invisible,
> and those living far or near,
> the born and those seeking birth,
> May all beings be happy! (Sn 1.8, trans Buddharakkhita)

The conclusion, then, is that animals matter ethically to Buddhists, and they matter in the same way as human beings, namely in their suffering. The fact that there are differences between animals and humans, argues Stewart, is true but irrelevant from a moral perspective. No-one wishes to claim that human beings and animals are equal in every way. Even leading animal rights activists like Peter Singer and Tom Regan accept that it is worse to kill a human being than an animal. It would be strange, Stewart points out, to suggest that leading members of the animal welfare movement were 'speciesist' for holding such a view and concludes the same is true of Buddhism. This opinion is supported by the fact that the *Vinaya* teaches that killing an animal is a minor (*pāyantika*) offence, while killing a human being is a much more serious one (a *pārājika*).

Vegetarianism

Vegetarianism is an often-debated issue in environmental literature, and two arguments are frequently advanced in its favour. First, modern ways of meat acquisition are uneconomic, wasteful, and harmful to the environment. Animals reared for their meat consume far greater resources than they yield, and animal agriculture also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Second, animals suffer when they are killed. This is known as the 'humane' argument and its aim is to reduce and ultimately put an end to animal suffering.

Given the concern for animals in Buddhist sources noted above, and the provision against causing harm in the first precept, it might be thought obvious that vegetarianism would follow as a logical corollary. Nonetheless, as David Seyfort Ruegg points out, vegetarianism plays a 'surprisingly inconspicuous role' in the early Buddhist canon (1980, 234). Among early texts, the *Jīvaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya* sheds some light on the question of vegetarianism, even though there are no specific injunctions affirming or prohibiting it. The *sutta* describes various actions performed in the slaughter of an animal and each of these is seen as an evil deed deserving of demerit. These include the orders to fetch the being that is to be slaughtered, the act of fetching, the order for the being to be slaughtered, the act of slaughtering, and the meat generated being served to a Buddha or disciple who eats it unknowingly. This discussion not only stresses that an animal is not to be killed to feed a monk, but also draws attention to the inhumane process of slaughter. Thus, the text appears to promote the humane argument for vegetarianism.

The suggestion that vegetarianism is the morally superior choice is supported by the emphasis on non-violence and compassion, and the prohibition on the professions of hunters and butchers. It is important, at the same time, to note that in the *Jīvaka Sutta* the Buddha allowed monks to accept and eat the meat that was offered to them on their alms rounds if it was 'pure in three respects,' namely if the monks had not seen, heard, or suspected that the animal was killed for their sake. Meat-eating was the norm in the Buddha's day, and the earliest sources depict the Buddha as following a non-vegetarian diet. His final meal appears to have been a dish of pork (DN ii.127), although its precise nature is disputed.

The Buddha resisted an attempt to make vegetarianism compulsory for monks (Vin ii 171-2). This proposal was made by Devadatta, the Buddha's cousin, with the objective of dividing the *saṅgha* and causing a schism. The Buddha rejected Devadatta's suggestion and affirmed that vegetarianism along with other austere practices should remain optional. The three restrictions on eating meat he laid down in the *Jīvaka Sutta* may then well represent a compromise on this controversial issue. To the present day, many monks justify meat-eating by reference to the *Jīvaka Sutta*, although at best this shows that meat-eating is permitted, not that it is compulsory. The practice of vegetarianism, by contrast, is increasingly common among lay Buddhists who regard it as a morally superior diet. As Dhammika notes, there are at least three *Jātaka*s (No. 75, 434, and 451) that hint at a shift towards vegetarianism (2015, 12).

Various explanations have been proposed as to why the Buddha did not make vegetarianism compulsory, and Bronwyn Finnigan summarises the most important (2017). The first was to avoid hardship, given that the Buddha's disciples were dependent on alms and vegetarian food many not always have been offered to them. The second is that it might offend lay donors if their

gift of meat was rejected and could appear as discourteous and ungrateful. Linked to this is the idea that it would deny the donor the opportunity to earn merit. A third is that it might lead to monks becoming over-attached to their diet and losing focus on the spiritual aspect of the religious life. A final reason is that in Buddhism intention is paramount, and unless a monk intentionally sought the death of an animal and was implicated in its death, he would incur no moral guilt from eating it.

In contrast to the West, where animals are slaughtered on an industrial scale in abattoirs, in many Asian countries butchering is done at a local level. This narrows the gap between producer and consumer and means that animals like chickens are often killed on demand, thus increasing the involvement of the consumer in the animal's death. Across the Buddhist world, however, there is considerable variation in practice. As Peter Harvey points out, 'In Theravāda countries, vegetarianism is universally admired but little practised' (2000, 161). Meat is regularly consumed by both laity and monks, although the more pious abstain from meat on the monthly observance days and on special feast days. Members of religious communities such as the *dasa sil mata* Buddhist women in Sri Lanka (see Chapter Nine), also tend to observe a vegetarian diet in contrast to the general population.

Mahāyāna sources, by contrast, categorically denounce the eating of meat. The eighth chapter of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* is a good example of the various reasons often cited in support of vegetarianism by the Mahāyāna. Peter Harvey (2000, 163) lists these as below. Interestingly, the Buddha here is represented as *rejecting* the idea that eating meat is blameless if it complies with the rule of the 'three pures.'

- All beings have at some time been one's close relatives and should be treated with compassion
- Meat has a bad smell and frightens beings, giving the meat-eater a bad reputation
- If monks eat meat, it will create a bad reputation for the Dharma and hinder the work of bodhisattvas in attracting beings
- Eating meat prevents progress in meditation and leads to arrogance
- The person who eats meat sleeps uneasily and is subject to bad dreams, bad health, and bad digestion
- Meat-eating leads to a bad rebirth, whereas a vegetarian diet leads to a good rebirth
- By abstaining from meat, the slaughter of animals is reduced, since there is less demand
- The *sūtra* also discusses the example of a meat-eating king whose excessive fondness and greed for meat made him resort to cannibalism. As a result, he was alienated from his relatives, his friends, and his people, and eventually had to abdicate.

Vegetarianism has had the greatest appeal in East Asian Buddhism. Many Chinese monasteries and temples are entirely vegetarian and follow the rule

to this effect in the *Brahmajāla Sūtra*. Many pious lay Buddhists are also vegetarian and associate this diet as a natural implication of the Bodhisattva vow. In Japan, it is not uncommon for those who earn a living by killing animals to perform memorial services (*kuyō*) on behalf of the animals killed.

In Tibet vegetarianism has historically been rare and meat is part of the general diet of both laity and monks, with certain rare exceptions. This is often attributed to the local conditions on the Tibetan plateau which make agriculture difficult. Tibetans have from time immemorial lived not as farmers but as nomadic herdsmen, moving their flocks periodically between the high pastures of Tibet and neighbouring Mongolia. The scarcity of alternatives to a vegetarian diet in Tibet, however, does not explain why some Tibetan lamas continue to eat meat while living outside of Tibet in the USA or elsewhere. The Dalai Lama might be described as a 'semi-vegetarian' in adhering to a vegetarian diet in Dharamsala and accepting meat dishes when offered by his hosts elsewhere. Abstaining from meat nevertheless occurs on observance days in Tibet, and rituals may be performed to aid the slaughtered animal in securing a better rebirth.

As Holly Gayley reports, the compassionate treatment of animals in Tibet has been the focal point of speeches and writings by an influential contemporary Buddhist cleric, Khenpo Tsultrim Lodrō of Larung Buddhist Academy (2017). Central to his teachings is a new version of the traditional ten precepts promulgated in 2008 by the Larung Academy. The new list of virtues includes precepts against selling livestock for slaughter, hunting, and wearing animal fur on the trim of traditional Tibetan coats. The enthusiastic promotion of these precepts by Tsultrim Lodrō has made him a leading figure in animal welfare among Tibetan Buddhist leaders today. In addition to these precepts, he advocates a vegetarian diet on religious holidays, protecting the habitats of wildlife, and liberating animals from confinement. A distinctive feature of his approach is to place less emphasis on traditional 'scare tactics' (like emphasizing the negative effect of karma), and placing greater stress on compassion, humane treatment, and the lived experience of animals. In this respect he may be described as a 'modernizer' who wishes to place Tibetan Buddhism in the vanguard of the global animal welfare movement.

Experimentation

Vegetarianism is just one of a range of issues that concern the treatment of animals. Another is animal experimentation (Lecso 1988). The Buddhist ideal of non-injury (*ahiṃsā*) clearly has implications for the use of animals in product testing, and in medical research and training. The modern world uses animals for these purposes in large numbers. Waldau suggests that hundreds of millions of laboratory animals around the world are killed annually in pursuit of research and product development (2018, 655). In the West, public opinion has increasingly turned against the use of animals in

cosmetics testing. The dissection of live animals in biology classes is also a source of disquiet, and alternative methods such as virtual reality simulators are replacing the traditional laboratory methods. In Japan, many companies and research facilities performing rituals to honour (and perhaps placate the spirits of) the animals that are killed in their laboratories. In America, the Buddhists Concerned for Animals group opposes animal experimentation and factory farming, and in Britain the Buddhist Animal Rights Group is active in these areas.

On the other hand, supporters of animal experimentation point to the benefits for human beings. A recent example is the use of dogs in gene-editing experiments which have shown promising results in halting the development of Duchenne muscular dystrophy in both animals and humans. Another example is xenotransplantation, or the transplantation of animal organs into human bodies. Countless people die awaiting organ transplants (on average 6000 per year in the USA), and animal organs could save many lives.

In 2022 surgeons at the University of Maryland Medical Centre in Baltimore USA performed the first transplant of a pig's heart into a patient who had only days to live. (The cloned donor animal was supplied by an offshoot of a British company that bred the world's first cloned animal—Dolly the Sheep—who we will meet again in Chapter Twelve). The pig's heart had undergone a process of humanisation involving ten genetic modifications to overcome rejection and reduce it to an appropriate size. Unfortunately, the patient in this case survived for only two months. Researchers are currently working on other developments, such as using pig skin for burns victims, pig blood for transfusion, and dopamine for Parkinson's sufferers. Pigs are already used to produce islet cells for diabetes patients and to provide replacement corneas.

Pigs are favoured by researchers because they produce large litters and have short pregnancies. While apes would be preferable given their similar genome, some species are endangered, and they produce fewer offspring. Ultimately, animals may no longer be required if the technology to allow organs to be grown in the laboratory matures sufficiently, but this is still a long way off. In the meantime, supporters argue that there is little moral difference between killing pigs for food and using them in medical research. Opponents disagree, and in response to the first animal to human transplant mentioned above the animal rights group PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) issued the following statement:

> Animal-to-human transplants are unethical, dangerous, and a tremendous waste of resources that could be used to fund research that might actually help humans. The risk of transmitting unknown viruses along with the animal organ are real and, in the time of a pandemic, should be enough to end these studies forever. Animals

> aren't toolsheds to be raided but complex, intelligent beings. It would be better for them and healthier for humans to leave them alone and seek cures using modern science.

More controversial than transplantation is the practice of vivisection. Vivisection has come to symbolize unnecessary cruelty to animals and a disregard for their suffering. Since, as mentioned above, Buddhism is a champion of compassion and non-violence, cruel and painful animal experimentation would be unacceptable. But this issue is not as simple as it appears, especially if the value given to other species is not egalitarian but relative. For example, does Buddhism oppose the (painless) slaughter of animals which may pass viruses like the coronavirus to human beings?

In 2020 the Danish government slaughtered millions of mink in an effort to halt the spread of the coronavirus. In previous years, Buddhist monks in Thailand have cooperated with public health authorities in encouraging villagers to slaughter chickens infected with the 'bird flu' virus. Buddhist texts also turn a blind eye to the suffering caused in the process of domesticating elephants, except for rare examples such as the *Dubbalakattha Jātaka* (J i.414–16) in which, though the pain is acknowledged, no directive to stop it is issued. This suggests that causing limited suffering to animals for human gain may be tolerated.

Similar conflicts arise in the case of pest control. Would a farmer who uses pesticides to raise a healthy crop be acting immorally given the relativity of value among humans and other species? Clearly it would be better if pesticides were not needed, but if their use produces a larger crop which feeds more human beings, one can see an argument for employing them. As regards the killing of malaria-spreading mosquitos, it appears that villagers in Thailand accept the use of DDT to suppress them, and it is not uncommon to see trucks winding their way along village roads spraying insecticide. In Burma, on the other hand, villagers seem reluctant to adopt this practice (Harvey 2000, 167). The Vinaya, however, allows no latitude in this respect: monks and nuns were advised that if harmful insects or animals like venomous snakes entered their dwellings, they should be gently chased away rather than killed (Heirman 2019).

Conclusion

We noted in the sources a variety of often overlapping reasons why Buddhists are concerned for the well-being of animals. Bronwyn Finnigan has attempted to isolate these and present them as formal arguments supporting animal welfare (2017). She is indeed correct in her observation that 'The Buddhist canon contains great diversity and plurality in modes of moral reasoning,' but sifting through the various statements she identifies five specific arguments. We can summarise these as arguments from: suffering, desire, no-self, virtue, and karma. As the arguments are concise, we can state them below.

1) Since killing and harming animals causes suffering, and since suffering is intrinsically bad and should be prevented, it follows that one should not kill or harm animals. This is the argument from suffering.
2) I do not desire to suffer. If I were killed that would cause me to suffer. Animals are like me in not desiring to suffer. Killing animals causes them to suffer. So, I should not kill animals. This is the argument from desire.
3) In the absence of a self there is no basis to privilege my interests over those of anyone else, including animals, so I should not harm them.
4) It is compassionate not to kill or harm animals. One should be compassionate. So, one should not kill or harm animals. This is the argument from virtue.
5) If one desires to avoid karmic retribution one should avoid wrongdoing. Since harming and killing animals are forms of wrongdoing, one should avoid harming and killing animals. This is the argument from karma.

While all of these are relevant, some are more commonly encountered than others. The first and second go together, particularly if we read the second as a restatement of the Golden Rule discussed in Chapter One, in other words, 'do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you.' If suffering is intrinsically bad, then no-one would desire it, so it would be wrong to inflict it on anyone. The third argument is the most abstruse and is more likely to be found in philosophical texts. It is not the kind of argument that would be cited by the average Buddhist layperson. The fourth and fifth arguments are very common, the fourth being associated particularly with Mahāyāna sources. Perhaps the fifth is the most common of all and is repeated in many places. We note, however, that unlike the fourth it is based more on self-interest (avoiding bad karma for oneself) rather than being directed to the welfare of animals.

These five arguments, however, form a convenient summary of the reasons Buddhists might advance for animal welfare. If we wished to boil them down further, we could perhaps summarise the principal arguments as the three mentioned at the outset of this chapter: non-harming, compassion, and karma. While the general Buddhist attitude to animals is clear, its response to contemporary challenges of the kind mentioned above, such as the use of animals in scientific research and culling as a means of maintaining the ecological balance, is less well defined. Buddhists are currently searching for answers to these questions, and there are differences of opinion across the Buddhist world. It is therefore advisable to bear in mind the opinion of Paul Waldau mentioned earlier that 'considerable care must be taken when claiming any kind of unanimity for Buddhists' (2018, 671).

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Animals are included in the general scope of general Buddhist ethical teachings (such as *ahiṃsā*, compassion, and karma) and other more specific teachings show a concern for animal welfare (such as disapproval of animal sacrifice).
- An important question is whether Buddhism values animals for themselves. The scriptural evidence is open to different interpretations, but there is no doubt that human life is seen as superior because of its soteriological potential (only humans can attain nirvana). While animals feature frequently in Buddhist teachings in a metaphorical and symbolic sense, little curiosity is shown about the animals themselves or their natural habitats.
- It is unclear from Buddhist teachings whether our moral obligations extend only to 'macro animals' or also include 'micro animals'.
- Theravāda Buddhism is ambivalent on the question of vegetarianism whereas Mahāyāna Buddhism is opposed to meat-eating.
- Buddhists are generally opposed to vivisection and painful experimentation on animals, but the extent to which humans may use animals painlessly (for example, as organ donors) or in a non-lethal context (such as in zoos) has not been much explored.

Discussion questions

1. Is Buddhism anthropocentric?
2. Which Buddhist teachings have a bearing on animal welfare?
3. Do Buddhists have moral obligations to 'micro animals'?
4. Should Buddhists support the practice of releasing trapped animals (*fang sheng*)?
5. Did the Danish government act immorally in 2020 in culling millions of mink to halt the spread of the coronavirus?
6. Is it legitimate to use animal organs for transplantation?
7. Should Buddhists be vegetarians?

Further reading

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Chapter Eight
Ecology

In this chapter

We begin by reviewing what the early sources say about the natural environment or 'receptacle world', with specific reference to plants and vegetation. These forms of life lie on the boundary of the moral world, and it is unclear whether human beings have obligations towards them. If they do, these obligations would presumably be weaker than those between human beings, or between human beings and animals. Nonetheless, it is clear that the natural environment is valued, and that the irresponsible destruction of nature is not in accordance with Buddhist principles. Engaged Buddhists are quite clear that we must do our utmost to protect the environment and take positive steps to ensure its survival. They base their activism on a range of Buddhist teachings, which will be discussed below. The most urgent threat today is the 'climate emergency' and engaged Buddhist groups join with secular and other organizations to combat the threat of global warning. We also look briefly at the influence of modern Western movements like 'deep ecology' on Buddhism.

Introduction

Buddhism is often seen as an 'eco-friendly' religion with an expanded moral horizon encompassing not just human beings but also animals and the environment. As such, it is generally thought to have a more 'enlightened' attitude to nature than Christianity, which has traditionally taught that mankind is the divinely appointed steward of creation holding authority over the natural order. Writers such as historian Lynn White (1967) see this belief as one of the underlying causes of the contemporary ecological crisis, since it encourages the idea that nature exists simply to serve human interests and is there to be exploited as circumstances demand. Buddhism, by contrast, is perceived as pursuing a path of harmonious integration with nature and as fostering identification and mutual respect within the natural world. For reasons of this kind, blame for environmental degradation is often laid at the door of the West and its exploitative attitude towards nature, while Asian cultures are thought to show greater respect for the environment. Ironically, however, Asian countries like China and India are today (with the United States) among the world's top three polluters, and the most polluted urban areas are also to be found on the Asian continent.

Nature in the early sources

The Buddha described his Indian homeland in the following terms: 'delightful parks, groves, landscapes, and lotus ponds are few, while more numerous are the hills and slopes, rivers that are hard to cross, places with stumps and thorns, and rugged mountains' (AN i.35). The terrain described here is what ecologists today would call 'wilderness.' The early sources show a lively awareness of the vegetation found in this terrain. The names of some 420 plants are found in Pali sources (Dhammika 2015, 1f), and the Buddha classified them into three categories, as medicinal herbs, grasses, and forest trees (AN iv.100). The *Vessantara Jātaka* (J.547) in one passage alone (6. 534-9) names a hundred plants and almost as many animals.

Despite its abundant vegetation, however, India in the time of the Buddha was not always the bucolic paradise that people might imagine. At certain times the monsoon could fail, bringing human and natural disasters in its wake. The ensuing drought would cause farmers to leave their fields and wander with their families in search of food. The *Jātakas* report how 'Crows would abandon the cities for the forest because people no longer fed them scraps, and fish and tortoises would bury themselves in the mud of their rapidly evaporating ponds in a desperate struggle to survive' (Dhammika 2015, 2). At this time, large areas of forest were being cleared for agriculture, either by being chopped or burnt down, while others were exploited for their timber 'on a large scale and in a systematic manner' (Dhammika 2015, 16). It should be born in mind that buildings at this time were almost all made of wood, as were carts, fences, and other essential agricultural implements and tools. Wood was also used to construct city walls and fortifications.

While most animals are protected by the scope of the first precept, the ethical status of plant life in early Buddhism is less clear. It is difficult to state definitively whether Buddhists believed plants and vegetation to be on a par with other beings that suffer, or whether they were considered to be non-sentient (Schmithausen 1991). One detailed list of precepts includes a rule that forbids causing injury to seeds and plants (DN i.5), and there are *Pātimokkha* injunctions that prohibit damage to vegetation, classifying it as a form of life with a single sense-faculty (*eka-indriya jīva*) (Vin iii.155). It is not clear, however, whether these rules have to do with ecology or public relations. Concern about lay expectations is evident in the *Vinaya*, and the laity would have compared Buddhist monks with their Jain rivals who are famous even today for their strict discipline. Clearly, it would not do for Buddhists to be seen as laxer than their competitors.

Bad karma is said to follow the cutting of a branch or tree that once gave fruit and shade (AN iii.369), and merit is promised to those who plant groves and parks (SN i.33). In popular belief trees and plants merited respect as the abode of deities. This, however, remains an ambiguous criterion for ecology, for it could imply that a tree uninhabited by a deity can be cut down. It also

suggests an interest in the protection of deities (theocentric) rather than the protection of trees (ecocentric). As for the wilderness that forms an important part of the ecological agenda today, Buddhism gives no specific injunctions for its conservation.

In connection with the protection of trees, we may digress for a moment to note the modern practice of tree ordination, something that did not exist in the Buddha's day. In order to combat deforestation, a group of Thai monks from the late 1980s adopted the practice of symbolically ordaining trees as members of the *saṅgha*. This involves the planting of saplings protected by an image of the Buddha placed nearby, or the wrapping of monks' robes around larger trees often with a plaque affixed warning of the dangers of deforestation. Monks engaged in such projects are known as 'environmental monks' in recognition of their work in addressing the suffering arising from environmental causes.

Returning to the Buddha's time, for town- and village-dwellers the wilderness contained both real and imaginary dangers. Pia Brancaccio notes how 'The wilderness as a whole was regarded as a threat . . . The woods were populated by wild animals, ghosts, strange human beings, *yakṣas* and other living entities that nurtured the fears and fantasies of villagers. Buddhism, developing within growing urban communities, again perceived the sylvan environment with a mixture of fear and respect' (1999, 116f). The rugged nature of the wilderness, however, did not blind Buddhists to its beauty. The natural beauty of the Gosiṅga-sāla forest grove near Vesālī, full of perfumed trees in bloom, is described as very pleasing to the eye on a moonlit night (MN i.212). Since aesthetic arguments are often evoked in environmental ethics to justify preserving the wild beauty of nature, Buddhist aesthetics can be likewise employed. At the same time, Buddhist literature also contains contrasting descriptions of opulent surroundings in which trees and ponds made of gold and other precious material are glorified (DN iii.182). Such descriptions suggest that the beauty of civilization was valued just as much as the beauty of the wilderness.

The 'hermit strand'

One of the most effective arguments for preserving the wilderness lies in what has come to be known as the 'hermit strand' in Buddhist literature. Identified by Lambert Schmithausen (1997), this concerns the predilection of hermits for peaceful natural surroundings in which to pursue the path to liberation without distraction (MN i.274). The Buddha encouraged his monks to seek solitude in the jungle, saying, 'Here are the roots of trees, here are empty houses. Meditate monks! Do not be slothful and reproach yourselves later, this is my instruction to you' (AN iii.87). He himself left a palace to live in the forest, and the fact that the main events in his life—such as his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death—all took place under trees or in parks associates him with natural environments.

The Buddha and his monks often took up residence in parks like the Jetavana near the town of Sāvatthi, a place described as 'not too near nor too far (from the town), with convenient access, quiet, remote from people, not crowded by day and quiet by night, suitable for spiritual practice' (Vin i.39). Without such places, the religious seeker would be unable to seek refuge from active life. The Buddha mentions 'there are disciples of mine who are tree-root dwellers and open-air dwellers, who do not use a roof for eight months [of the year]' (MN ii.8). He reports his own experience in this connection:

> I wandered by stages through the Magadhan country until eventually I arrived at Senānigama near Uruvelā. There I saw an agreeable piece of ground, a delightful grove with a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearby a village for alms resort. I considered: 'This is an agreeable piece of ground, this is a delightful grove with a clear-flowing river with pleasant, smooth banks and nearby a village for alms resort. This will serve for the striving of a clansman intent on striving.' And I sat down there thinking: 'This will serve for striving'. (MN i.166f)

Approaches to environmentalism

Much contemporary impetus for environmental protection has come from within engaged Buddhism, and terms such as 'Green Buddhism,' 'eco-Buddhism,' 'eco-Dharma,' and 'eco-engaged Buddhism' are frequent in the literature. As Kaza notes, the academic origins of Buddhist environmentalism stem from a conference on Buddhism and Ecology held at Harvard in 1996 organized by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim (2018, 437). Writers and activists have subsequently produced a huge number of publications on this topic, but three seminal collections have achieved semi-canonical status within the movement. Appearing within ten years of each other in the decade beginning in 1990 they are: *Dharma Gaia* (Hunt-Badiner 1990); *Buddhism and Ecology* (Tucker and Williams 1997); and *Dharma Rain* (Kaza and Kraft 2000).

In some respects, Buddhism came late to the party. As David Loy notes, 'In my experience . . . most Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist groups did not become very concerned about the eco-crisis until after 2010, at least not in the United States, and I doubt that it was much different with Buddhist groups in other developed countries.' He laments an early lack of interest, noting 'In 2009 Wisdom Publications released an anthology titled *A Buddhist Response to the Climate Emergency,* coedited by John Stanley, Gyurme Dorje, and myself … to our surprise, it aroused almost no interest in the Buddhist community' (2019, 46). Things have improved in the interim, and there is now considerably more activity on this front. Loy singles out 'One Earth Sangha' as 'Perhaps the foremost Buddhist organization in the United States explicitly focusing on ecological problems' (2019, 47). One Earth Sangha was founded by Kristin Barker and Lou Leonard in 2013. More recently, the Rocky Mountain Ecodharma Retreat Center opened in 2017 near Boulder, Colorado.

Doctrinal underpinnings

Scholars have developed a variety of theoretical underpinnings for Buddhist environmentalism. For the most part, these are adaptations or novel applications of doctrines based on what environmental advocates believe the Buddhist attitude to the environment *should* be, since the ancient texts themselves had little to say about what is quintessentially a modern problem. The authors therefore seek to discover affinities between Buddhist teachings and the natural world and to develop new applications for classical doctrines like compassion, no-self, and dependent origination.

One approach is to argue that Buddhist virtues can have a bearing on attitudes toward the environment. Writers who have proposed an ecological ethics grounded in personal virtue include Pragati Sahni (2007), Simon James (2004), Cooper and James (2005), and the present author (Keown 2007). The argument advanced by these authors is that attitudes like the four *brahma-vihāra*s, namely loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), will automatically incline the practitioner to take a benevolent attitude to the natural world. Virtues like frugality, equanimity, and non-harming, furthermore, will by their nature have an impact on the environment by limiting over-consumption and steering individuals away from harmful practices in industry and agriculture.

The virtues just described will also counteract the effect of consumerism which encourages individuals to acquire an endless stream of material goods, reinforcing the sense of self as owner. Consumerism stimulates desires that can never be fulfilled and offers false solutions to the problem of suffering through an endless array of new products. Consumerism also places increasing strain on limited natural resources needed for the manufacture of goods, causing harm to the environment contrary to the principle of *ahiṃsā.* Even though Buddhist virtues were not originally taught for ecological reasons, they do tend to promote an outlook and way of life that has much in common with the aims of the environmental movement. If so, it may be claimed that by adhering to Buddhism's traditional ethical injunctions a person simultaneously lives in harmony with the environment.

But is personal virtue enough? Many writers suggest that a 'bottom up' approach of this kind is insufficient, and that 'top down' strategies are also required. These will include measures taken at national level by governments and at international level by organizations like the United Nations and other bodies. This two-level approach is needed because there is a limit to what can be achieved by individuals working in isolation. For example, laws will be needed to enforce compliance with targets on CO^2 emissions. On this basis, Stephanie Kaza argues for 'an emergent and contextual approach' that will complement individual ethics with social policies in a two-pronged manner (2018). The resulting ecological strategy will reflect specific local and

cultural contexts and be responsive to solutions that emerge out of existing conditions. Kaza by no means excludes the role of the classical teachings on virtues and precepts but recognizes the need to supplement these in an emergent ethic incorporating 'creative construction' that reflects the specific needs of modern times and circumstances (2018, 449). In this way she believes Buddhist teachings can help reduce overconsumption, combat consumerism, and—through the use of techniques like 'food awareness'—raise awareness of 'the co-arising of human and planetary health.'

Complementing this approach, scholar and activist Joanna Macy has drawn comparisons between Buddhist thought and modern systems theory. Her approach has been described as follows:

> Macy's scholarly understanding of systems is central to her analysis of environmental issues emphasizing the complexity of interdependence throughout space and time. Her activist training exercises draw on Mahāyāna themes and world views to provide a broad context for engagement. She works closely with Buddhist psychology to help environmentalists transform debilitating emotions into effective motivation. Macy's orientation to a Buddhist environmental ethic is pragmatic (using skilful means) and applied (often issue specific), using awareness practices to sustain 'eco-bodhisattvas' across endless challenges. She reinforces insights that generate 'greening of the self', a dynamic understanding of self as conditioned by and cocreated with nature. (Kaza 2018, 438)

Macy draws parallels between systems theory and the doctrine of dependent origination, which she understands in a manner similar to the 'interdependence' of engaged Buddhism: in other words, as teaching that the entire cosmos has an underlying metaphysical unity that links all phenomena in a delicate and complex web of relationships. The image of 'Indra's net' mentioned in Chapter Two is often used to illustrate this notion, the net being a web of jewels which glisten and reflect one another in their many different facets creating a 'fractal' vision of reality. Understanding the nature of interdependence is a crucial step in what Macy calls 'the greening of the self,' or the development of an environmental consciousness. The notion of interdependence is widely accepted within Buddhist ecology, and many authorities, such as Sallie King (2009) and Rita Gross (1997), regard it as foundational to Buddhist environmentalism.

David Loy, mentioned above, is another influential Buddhist thinker, writer, and ecological activist. Loy sets out his views in a book called *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis* (2019). Loy marshals evidence from climate scientists, ecologists, and other authorities to paint an alarming picture of the damage done by decades of ecological exploitation. At the root of the crisis, Loy suggests, is the notion of separateness, or the ingrained notion that human beings are separate from the environment rather than

part of it. In many religions, including some strands of Buddhism, this gives rise to a 'cosmological dualism' and the belief that salvation must be found independently by each individual. The way to counter this, Loy argues, is to shift the emphasis in Buddhist teachings so that less importance is placed on individual liberation and more on social and institutional *dukkha*. Thus, Loy writes:

> There is another way to understand the essential teaching of Buddhism. Instead of trying to transcend this world, or fit into it better, we can awaken and experience the world, including ourselves, in a different way. This involves deconstructing and reconstructing the sense of self, or (more precisely) the relationship between oneself and one's world . . . As we begin to wake up and realize that we are not separate from each other, nor from this wondrous earth, we realize that the ways we live together and relate to the earth need to be reconstructed too. That means not only social engagement as individuals helping other individuals, but finding ways to address the problematic economic and political structures that are deeply implicated in the eco-crisis and the social justice issues that confront us today. Ultimately the paths of personal transformation and social transformation are not really separate from each other. Engagement in the world is how our individual awakening blossoms, and how contemplative practices such as meditation ground our activism, transforming it into a spiritual path. (2019, 5)

The antidote to the suffering caused by climate change and other environmental problems is then, Loy suggests, to grasp the non-dual nature of reality and cease to strive for escape to a transcendent realm which in any case does not exist. Here Loy draws on the Zen tradition to suggest that an appreciation of non-dualism will lead us to stop viewing nature as a commodity that can be owned by individuals and to appreciate it as a common resource for which we have a shared responsibility.

The doctrine of 'Buddha nature' also provides a convenient doctrinal foundation for non-dual ecology. This is a doctrine that came to prominence in East Asia but is not significant in Indian Buddhism. The idea is that a metaphysical property called 'Buddha nature' is common to all sentient beings, both human and animal. Sometimes it is held that Buddha-nature is also present in inanimate nature, and so exists in plants, rivers, trees, and mountains (Schmithausen 1991). Ideas of this kind lead naturally to the idea that nature has intrinsic value and Buddhahood in some sense involves identification with nature. The understanding that nature is integral to human reality, Loy points out, is common in indigenous traditions but is a perspective the modern industrialized world has lost sight of. The root of the problem, then, according to many traditions of Buddhism, is a kind of spiritual blindness. We are facing, says Loy, the 'collective koan' of the death of humanity and all living beings, and only a spiritual awakening can save us (2019, 140).

Deep ecology

The Buddhist ecology movement did not originate in a vacuum, and influential ecological movements in the West preceded and arguably played a part in the 'awakening' of an ecological consciousness in Buddhism. These movements share with Buddhism the common characteristic of seeing humanity as part of a global whole rather than occupying a place at the centre of the cosmos.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), an American naturalist, philosopher, and scientist, was a pioneer in this respect and one of the first writers to set out an eco-centric vision in his book *A Sand County Almanac* published posthumously in 1949. Leopold was a professor at the University of Wisconsin and is regarded by many as the father of wildlife conservation due to his emphasis on preserving the 'wilderness,' a term he popularised, and which remained at the centre of his thinking. He argued that the wilderness should as far as possible be preserved from human interference and allowed to find its own ecological balance so that a thriving biotic community could emerge.

The Sand County Almanac includes a chapter known as 'The Land Ethic' in which Leopold defines conservation as 'a state of harmony between men and land'. He explains as follows:

> The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land . . . A land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, and use of these 'resources,' but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state. In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (1968, 204)

Leopold's ecological vision has left an enduring legacy on the environmental movement, but a more direct connection with Buddhism was made by another ecological pioneer, the Norwegian philosopher and environmentalist Arne Naess (1912-2009). Naess acknowledged the work of writers such as Leopold in the early post-war period but believed that the roots of the ecological malaise lay in the cultural and philosophical presuppositions of modern Western societies. To express this idea, he coined the term 'deep ecology,' which he contrasted with the 'shallow ecology' of superficial remedies and short-term 'fixes' employed by Western governments and businesses to address ecological problems. A deeper understanding of nature, he believed, required an appreciation of biological diversity in which each living thing exists in dependence on other creatures in a web of relationships. Naess's ecological vision takes on a spiritual dimension in his belief that sentient beings can achieve 'self-realization' by identifying with the reality all share and so overcoming the delusion that they exist as separate selves. Naess's ideas clearly resonate with key Buddhist teachings like interdependence and no-self.

Leopold and Naess are just two examples of how Western ecological thinking dovetails with Buddhism. There are many more, and Kaza details further connections, including contributions from both secular and religious thinkers in other traditions (2018, 441f). Ecology is a subject which perhaps more than any other brings Eastern and Western thinkers into dialogue.

Climate change

Climate science is a modern development, but the idea that climate change can have cataclysmic consequences is familiar in Buddhist mythology. The ancient sources teach that the universe evolves and declines over vast cycles of time and is periodically destroyed in turn by fire, flood, hurricanes, and earthquakes. It is also believed that such changes are driven by the collective karma of the world's inhabitants. From here it is only a short step to the modern belief that climate change is attributable to human behaviour. Some writers have adopted the concept of the 'anthropocene', a term coined to denote the present geological era dating from the time when human activity began to have an impact on the planet's climate and ecosystems. Visible signs attributable to climate change in this era are, as Kaza notes, 'accelerating melt rates of glaciers and ice shelves, thawing permafrost, ocean acidification, severe drought, hotter wildfires, and more extreme weather events' (2018, 445).

In 2009 twenty-six Buddhist leaders from across the globe signed *A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* (updated in 2015), warning that failing to change current harmful trends involves a violation of the first precept (not to cause harm to living beings) 'on the largest possible scale'. While Buddhist virtues like frugality and mindfulness will by their nature reduce one's carbon footprint, the declaration points out that change is also required at a systemic level, such as the large-scale adoption of renewable sources of energy and new sources of transportation. The following is an extract from the Declaration.

> Many scientists have concluded that the survival of human civilization is at stake. We have reached a critical juncture in our biological and social evolution. There has never been a more important time in history to bring the resources of Buddhism to bear on behalf of all living beings. The four noble truths provide a framework for diagnosing our current situation and formulating appropriate guidelines—because the threats and disasters we face ultimately stem from the human mind, and therefore require profound changes within our minds. If personal suffering stems from craving and ignorance—from the three poisons of greed, ill will, and delusion—the same applies to the suffering that afflicts us on a collective scale. Our ecological emergency is a larger version of the perennial human predicament. Both as individuals and as a species, we suffer from a sense of self that feels disconnected not only from other people but from the Earth itself. As Thich Nhat Hanh has said, 'We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.' We need to wake up and realize

> that the Earth is our mother as well as our home—and in this case the umbilical cord binding us to her cannot be severed. When the Earth becomes sick, we become sick, because we are part of her.

The One Earth Sangha has also published a list entitled 'Sixteen Core Dharma Principles to Address Climate Change'. The group's website (https://oneearthsagha.org) relates how 'In June of 2013 the Dharma Teachers International Collaborative on Climate Change developed the sixteen principles below as a companion to the 'The Earth as Witness: International Dharma Teachers' Statement on Climate Change'. Since this list provides a comprehensive summary of the Buddhist teachings relevant to today's environmental crisis, it is given in full below.

1. *Reverence for life*: From this point forward climate disruption is the overriding context for all life on earth, including humans. What we humans do will determine what life survives and thrives and in what form and locations.
2. *Happiness stems from helping others*: Our greatest personal happiness comes when we give of ourselves and help others. For example, many people instinctually help our neighbors after a natural disaster, which indicates that altruism and the desire to help others is built unto our genes. We must grow and apply this to the marginalized among us that are at least initially hit hardest by climate disruption. This is the very opposite of the greed and self-centeredness that dominates today.
3. *We suffer when we cling*: The very nature of happiness is dependent on our capacity to give up our attachments and help others. This same principle must now be elevated and applied to public policies of all types.
4. *The ethical imperative*: All beings matter. We should act in ways that are beneficial for both self and others, acting out of a commitment to altruism and compassion for others.
5. *Interconnection and interdependence*: We must dissolve objectification of other people and nature and overcome the belief in a separate self that leads us to through a sense of kinship. Even as we let go of the delusion of an individual self that is separate from other people, we must let go of the delusion that humanity is separate from the rest of the biosphere. Our interdependence with the earth means that we cannot pursue our own well-being at the cost of its well-being. When the earth's ecosystems become sick, so do our bodies and our societies.
6. *Renunciation, simplicity*: To resolve climate disruption we must be willing to renounce attachments to things to contribute to the problem and live more simply.
7. *The relationship between the First and Second Noble Truth and capacity to learn to work with difficult states*: Understanding the suffering we have created symbolized by climate disruption and how it came about and that we can learn not to identify with it and instead work through distressing states such as fear, despair, etc.
8. *Opening to suffering as a vehicle for awakening*: The suffering caused by climate disruption provides an unprecedented opportunity for humans to learn from our individual and collective mistakes and manifest a great awakening. It is a special opportunity like never before. We can find ways to be happy—we

can 'tend and befriend' rather than fight (among ourselves), flee, or freeze. We can acknowledge that this is the way things are now, open to the suffering rather than becoming attached, and think and act in new ways.

9. *The interconnectedness of inner and outer, the individual and the collective (or institutional)*: Climate disruption provides an unprecedented opportunity to understand the roots of the problem—which relate to the ways our minds work and how those patterns become embedded in collective and collective/institutional practices and policies. This awareness can open the door to new ways of thinking and responding that will eventually produce different institutional practices and policies.
10. *Connection to diversity and justice issues*: The Dharma principles and narratives must also apply to issues or diversity and social inclusion and justice. The beliefs in separateness etc that has produced the climate crisis also leads to social inequity and exclusion. People of color and other marginalized groups must be included.
11. *Buddhism as a social change agent*: The principles of Buddhism help us engage with life, not remove ourselves from it. The Buddha was actively engaged with his social and cultural contexts and for Buddhism to have relevance today it must help people understand how to engage in today's political and social contexts.
12. *Adhitthana or determination*: We are called to develop resolve, determination, and heroic effort now. We must have the courage to realize that we are being called to engage in this issue and that living the Dharma will see us through the hard times.
13. *This precious human birth is an opportunity*: We must always remember that it is a rare and precious thing to be born as a human and we have been given a rare opportunity to act as stewards because humans are not only the source of destruction—we are also a source of great goodness.
14. *Love is the greatest motivator*: Our deepest and most powerful action comes out of love: of this earth, of each other. The more people can connect with and feel love for the Earth, the greater the likelihood that their hearts will be moved to help prevent harm. Children should therefore be a top priority. [We] Need to help people realize what they love about life and what will be lost as climate disruption increases.
15. *The sangha—and other forms of social support—are essential*: The reality of climate disruption is a profound shock to many people and the only way to minimize or prevent fight, flight, freeze responses is to be supported by and work with others so people will not feel alone, can overcome despair, and develop solutions together. We need to go through this journey together, sharing our difficult reactions and positive experiences in groups and communities.
16. *The Bodhisattva*: The figure of the Bodhisattva which is a unifying image of someone who is dedicated to cultivating the inner depths and to helping others, is an inspiring figure for our times.

We see included here many of the themes in Buddhist ecology we have considered in this chapter. The list of sixteen core principles is a compendium of the resources Buddhism can bring to bear on ecological problems. Thus, we see reference to virtues, precepts, the recognition of suffering, non-

attachment, compassion, renunciation and simplicity in lifestyle, reverence for life, the need for social justice and social change, inclusiveness and interconnectedness, commitment and determination, the importance of the *saṅgha*, and the inspirational ideal of the bodhisattva.

Conclusion

Despite the undoubted enthusiasm and commitment of eco-Buddhists, it is not easy to classify Buddhism as categorically 'ecologically friendly'. We will conclude by pointing out some of the main problems facing Buddhist environmentalism.

In historical terms, Buddhist attitudes towards the natural world have been complex and at times contradictory. On the one hand, references to plants and the wilderness prove Buddhism's awareness of the world of nature. On the other, the importance given to human beings as well as the fact that ultimate value is given to the pursuit of liberation leaves an impression that the natural world has at best a secondary or instrumental value. The aim of classical Buddhist teachings is not 'to green *saṃsāra*' by restoring its ecological balance but to attain nirvana, or at least as a secondary goal, to pass from the human world to the relative security of a heavenly birth.

Even the 'hermit strand' is anthropocentric because it values nature as a means to a human end, and anthropocentrism is generally berated in environmental literature. The fact that the world is seen as inherently flawed and imperfect, and ultimately a disvalue, seems to cast a shadow over the prospects for a Buddhist ecology. It should be remembered that not all Buddhists are of the engaged variety. Disengaged Buddhists will not view ecological problems with the same urgency and may see today's climate crisis as part of a natural cycle in which ecosystems periodically rise and fall despite the best efforts of human beings to the contrary.

Some commentators also challenge overreliance on the metaphor of 'Indra's net' pointing out that it involves a sectarian interpretation of the doctrine of dependent origination which is not found in the early sources or shared by all schools. For this and other reasons, Ian Harris suggests there is no defensible basis in Buddhist thought for an environmental ethic (1994). The view that the whole of the cosmos is intrinsically valuable and pure with each part reflected in all the others may even be problematic for ecology to the extent that it appears to place carbon dioxide gases and nuclear waste on a par with rivers and lakes. If everything is part of a cosmic whole, does not each part of the whole have a right to exist? Even if we share a vision of universal interconnectivity, moreover, it does not by itself give us a reason to act ecologically. The fundamental reason for decreasing greenhouse gasses is that we value *life* (and particularly human life) more than greenhouse gases, not because the two are interconnected. We could reach this conclusion without any reference to Indra's Net.

In advancing his critique, Harris is supported by Lambert Schmithausen, the scholar who identified the 'hermit strand' in Buddhist literature. Schmithausen demonstrates that the original purpose of the doctrine of dependent origination was to chart a path to liberation for the individual and it had no direct bearing on ecology. To turn it into an ecological teaching, he agrees, is to distort it (1997). In response to this charge, engaged Buddhists admit, as noted in Chapter Two, that their notion of 'interdependence' is indeed a hybrid doctrine that has emerged to meet a specific modern need, but argue that it is nevertheless defensible since it draws on core Buddhist doctrines and is otherwise in harmony with the spirit of Buddhist teachings (Fuller 2021).

Eco-Buddhists can also claim that all of the approaches to ecology mentioned above converge on a fundamental Buddhist value, namely the amelioration of suffering. It is difficult to be free from suffering if one lives in a polluted environment and on a planet threatened by global warming. One Earth Sangha runs a training programme known as 'Ecosattva Training' aimed at reducing 'eco-suffering' by tracing the interdependent environmental roots of global suffering.' To complement such work, a variation on the bodhisattva vow known as the 'ecosattva vow' has been proposed by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, and seems an appropriate note on which to close the chapter.

> I VOW TO MYSELF and to each of you:
> To commit myself daily to the healing of our world
> And the welfare of all beings
> To live on earth more lightly and less violently
> in the food, products, and energy I consume.
> To draw strength and guidance from the living Earth,
> the ancestors, the future generations,
> and my brothers and sisters of all species.
> To support others in our work for the world
> and to ask for help when I need it.
> To pursue a daily practice
> that clarifies my mind, strengthens my heart,
> and supports me in observing these vows.
> — from *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in without Going Crazy*, by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (2012, 203).

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- There is much ambivalence in early sources with respect to the natural world, and the moral status of plant life is unclear. In ancient India, trees and forests were exploited for human use and deforestation was occurring even in the Buddha's day. The 'hermit strand' in Buddhist literature (textual passages revealing the importance of the wilderness for solitary meditation) shows that early Buddhism valued the environment. However, this only provides evidence of an anthropocentric (human centred) interest in nature and does not show that the environment was valued for itself.
- Buddhist environmentalism assumes that 'engagement' is the norm, but this is disputed, as we saw in Chapter Two. Engaged Buddhists have made ecological concern a priority and have produced abundant literature claiming that Buddhism is fundamentally 'green' and can make a major contribution to environmental problems in the modern world. Supporters of 'disengaged' Buddhism, however, are unlikely to give the same priority to ecological issues and will tend to see ecological decline (and subsequent renewal) as simply part of the nature of *saṃsāra* and beyond human capacity to change.
- The doctrine of dependent origination is often presented as the solution to ecological problems. However, in early Buddhism this teaching was never linked to ecology, and in later Buddhism only certain East Asian schools see it as a universal principle of connectivity, as in the example of 'Indra's Net'.
- Some Buddhists believe that Buddhism should adopt a 'ground up' approach to ecological problems, while others argue that only a 'top down' approach can succeed. The 'ground up' approach is the view that change will come through individuals changing their behaviour. The 'top down' approach believes that international cooperation at a governmental level is the best way to produce results. There is, of course, no reason why both approaches cannot be combined, as suggested by Kaza (2018).
- Pioneers of modern ecology in the West include Aldo Leopold, who emphasised the importance of the wilderness and its biotic community, and Arne Naess, the founder of 'deep ecology'. Their ideas and activism helped stimulate contemporary ecological awareness, including among Buddhists.
- The most pressing ecological problem at this time is climate change. In recognition of this, in 2009 twenty-six Buddhist leaders from across the globe signed *A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change* (updated in 2015).

Discussion questions

1. How 'green' was the Buddha?
2. Is Buddhism anthropocentric?
3. 'Buddhism has no interest in ecology because its goal is to escape from this world, not to save it.' Do you agree?
4. Which Buddhist teachings are most effective in supporting environmentalism?

5. Which Buddhist virtues can help with the climate crisis?
6. Does the doctrine of dependent origination provide a firm foundation for Buddhist ecology?

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Chapter Nine
Sex and Gender

In this chapter

The Buddhist attitude to sex has been compared to the sexual culture of Victorian Europe which was simultaneously repressive and permissive (Langenberg 2018, 567). Perhaps this explains why we find in Buddhist sources expressions of strong disapproval alongside detailed and almost voyeuristic accounts of sexual practices. A dominant theme across all schools is the danger of sexual desire, especially for monastics, and women are portrayed as sexual temptresses, often in overtly misogynist ways. 'Heteronormativity' (see below) is the default position, and while homosexuality is generally disproved of it is not categorically condemned. In modern times, campaigns against discrimination against the LGBTQ community have been launched from within engaged Buddhism, and a point commonly emphasized is that philosophical teachings like no-self and emptiness undermine the basis for discrimination against women and non-binary genders.

The terms 'sex' and 'gender' are understood in a variety of ways. In traditional Buddhist sources sex is a binary category consisting of male and female genders. These genders are determined at birth by possession of male or female sex organs. In modern times, the term 'gender' has been given a new meaning by feminist scholars as a socially constructed role with which a person identifies subjectively. On this understanding, gender is an internal sense of self which, moreover, extends along a spectrum embracing male, female, and non-binary identities. The distinction between sex and gender will not be of much relevance in the first half of the chapter where the discussion mainly concerns sexual ethics. The concept of gender fluidity, however, will be relevant to topics discussed in the second half.

Sexuality

Buddhism is generally regarded as less dogmatic on sexual ethics than other religions. The erotic art of India and Tibet and a plethora of popular books about Tantric sex reinforce the impression that Buddhism has a 'liberated' view of sexuality. Christianity is sometimes seen as having a 'hang-up' about sex and to be overly concerned with virginity and celibacy, whereas Buddhism is perceived to be more relaxed and less 'neurotic' about such matters. In practice, however, Buddhism is conservative on questions of sex, and traditional Buddhist societies tend to be reserved and even prudish. Those who turn to Buddhism in the hope of finding a hippy-like attitude embracing 'free love' and 'polyamory' are therefore likely to be disappointed.

Most Buddhist monks would be embarrassed to discuss questions of sex and reproduction, and although attitudes are slowly changing, such matters are generally taboo. The *Vinaya* (iii.130) contains a rule that forbids monks speaking to women about erotic matters, and it may be thought that a frank discussion of sexual issues is sailing close to the wind. Although Tantric schools have flourished on and off down the centuries, the erotic art they made use of was mainly a symbolic means of conveying philosophical and religious teachings rather than for use in sexual rites. Even then, such ideas represent only a minor—if colourful—strand within the history of Buddhism as a whole (Wedermeyer 2013).

It may be helpful to explore Christian attitudes to sex as a point of departure. Although attitudes have changed in modern times, a basic feature of traditional Christian teaching has been that sex should be linked to procreation, and that procreation is good and desirable. In the Old Testament, God expresses the desire that his creatures should 'be fruitful and multiply' (*Genesis* 1:22). The production of progeny is valued, and to remain unmarried was shameful in the eyes of the Old Testament (a similar attitude is evident in ancient Indian society). In the creation of progeny, parents were seen as playing their part in God's overall plan for creation. Although God is the ultimate author of life, through their union parents cooperate with him in the transmission of this divine gift. So important is this role that the institution that provides the social and legal framework for it, namely marriage, is given sacramental status and celebrated in church. From the above account it will be clear that the traditional Christian perspective is 'heternormative,' in other words it believes that heterosexuality is the normal and most natural expression of human sexuality. While on the subject of terminology, another word commonly used to describe both Christianity and Buddhism is 'androcentric', meaning that these traditions routinely favour male interests over female ones.

Buddhist reflections on sexuality have a different starting point to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and Buddhism's position has been characterized by scholars like Langenberg as 'antinatalist' (2018, 578). Support for this perspective is seen in the fact that Buddhist teachings impose no obligation to procreate, and rather than a sign of divine bounty, birth is seen as the gateway to another round of suffering (*dukkha*) in the cycle of *saṃsāra*. The generation of a new life does not provide evidence that the parents are playing their part in the unfolding of a divine plan, but as evidence of a failure on the part of their offspring to attain nirvana. As Langenberg describes it, sexuality is the 'biological engine that turns the wheel of *saṃsāra*, fueling the cycle of human rebirth' (2018, 572). Langenberg thus sees evidence of a deep strain of 'antinatalism' or 'antifecundism' in Buddhism. A corollary of this apparent lack of interest in procreation is the suggestion that Buddhism is not strongly opposed to homosexual relations.

Counterbalancing this antinatalist position is a perspective that sees birth in a more positive light. To achieve what the texts call a 'precious human rebirth' is considered a great blessing, since rebirth as a human being provides the most favourable opportunity to attain nirvana. Furthermore, rebirth need not be seen as a futile series of endless cycles and can be conceptualized instead as an ascending spiral: in this way, despite being reborn, some ground has been gained and the goal of nirvana is closer than it was before. Finally, the normative Buddhist understanding of sexuality is procreative, and non-procreative sexual activity of any kind is frowned upon by traditional commentators, as we shall see below. These facts are difficult to reconcile with the claim that Buddhism is antinatalist.

The dangers of sexual desire

Buddhism in general adopts a wary attitude towards sex. As an ascetic tradition it teaches that control of the appetites and desires is a prerequisite for spiritual development. The Second Noble Truth states that the cause of suffering is desire or craving (*taṇhā*). Erotic desires are among the strongest and represent a potent obstacle in the quest for liberation. In the *Ādittapariyāya* (Sermon on Burning) the Buddha speaks of desire in the following way:

> Bhikkhus, all is burning. And what, bhikkhus, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition-whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant-that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say. (SN iv.19)

In conversation with the monk Udāyin, the Buddha speaks of sensual pleasure as follows:

> Now, Udāyin, the pleasure and joy that arise dependent on these five cords of sensual pleasure are called sensual pleasure—a filthy pleasure, a coarse pleasure, an ignoble pleasure. I say of this kind of pleasure that it should not be pursued, that it should not be developed, that it should not be cultivated, that it should be feared. (MN i.455)

Elsewhere, sense pleasures are said to be perilous, suffering, a disease, a boil, a tie, a swamp (AN iii.310f) and are likened to a whirlpool (AN iii.125). Craving for sensual pleasure is the first of the three 'taints' (*āsava*) (AN iii.414), and an underlying tendency to sensual lust is said to lie dormant even in a young infant (MN i.534). Hedonism (the pursuit of pleasure as an end) is rejected as a 'coarse way of practice' (*āgāḷhā-paṭipadā*) (AN i.295). It is not just sex itself that is a problem, but a range of preliminary or associated activities known as 'the seven bonds of sexuality'. As Langenberg summarizes them (from AN iv.55-57) these include receiving a massage from

a woman, joking with a woman, gazing into the eyes of a woman, listening to women's voices, recalling pleasant social interactions with women from former times, closely observing the life of a householder as he indulges in the 'five cords of desire', or fantasizing about being born in heaven as a result of *brahmacariya* (2018, 570).

In keeping with the above, the Buddha said that he knew of nothing that overpowers a man's mind so much as 'the form of a woman':

> Bhikkhus, I do not see even one other form that is as tantalizing, sensuous, intoxicating, captivating, infatuating, and as much of an obstacle to achieving the unsurpassed security from bondage as the form of a woman. Beings who are lustful for the form of a woman—ravenous, tied to it, infatuated, and. blindly absorbed in it—sorrow for a long time under the control of a woman's form. (AN iii.68)

Perhaps the danger mentioned above underlies the Buddha's oft-quoted advice to his personal attendant Ānanda on how monks should behave towards women.

> Lord, how should we behave towards women?
> —Do not see them, Ānanda.
> But if we see them, how should we behave, Lord?
> —Do not speak to them, Ānanda.
> But if they speak to us, Lord, how should we behave?
> —Practise mindfulness, Ānanda. (DN ii.141)

While such advice may be seen as simple misogyny, it also acknowledges the danger posed by sexual desire to members of a celibate community. Monks would come into daily contact with women in the villages as they received food on their alms round, and the Buddha was aware how easily attraction could arise. He makes similar points about female sexual desire too, warning of the dangers of the desire women feel for men. Although women are said to be 'a snare of Māra' (the Buddhist devil), it is not basically women who are the problem, nor men, but the sexual desire that binds both to *saṃsāra*.

The third precept

The sexual morality of the laity is governed primarily by the third precept. This prohibits 'misconduct in things sexual' (*kāmesu micchācāra*). The wording of the precept is imprecise and does not define which forms of behaviour constitute 'misconduct' as clearly as the *Vinaya*. Although it makes no explicit reference to 'coveting another man's wife', as does the third commandment, the third precept is universally interpreted in Buddhist societies as prohibiting adultery. Little is said about premarital sex, but the impression is given that marriage is the most appropriate forum for sexual intimacy. The *Sigālaka Sutta* speaks disapprovingly of 'dicing, wenching, and drinking' and of being 'drunk and lecherous' (DN iii.184f).

Some early sources specify certain classes of women who are precluded as sexual partners, such as close relatives and vulnerable young girls. Medieval commentators expand on this by including prohibited times, places, and methods of intercourse. The following are some ways the third precept can be broken, according to the commentaries:

1) Intercourse with a forbidden woman, that is, the wife of another, one's mother, one's daughter, or one's paternal or maternal relations.
2) Intercourse with one's own wife through a forbidden orifice.
3) In an unsuitable place: an uncovered spot, a shrine, or forest.
4) At an unsuitable time: when the wife is pregnant, when she is nursing, or when she has taken a vow. (*Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* IV.74a–b, 4th century CE)

Another formulation is as follows:

1) In an improper part of the body, such as 'by way of the mouth or anus'.
2) In an improper place, such as near the retinue of a guru, a monastery, a funeral monument **(***stūpa***),** or where many people have gathered.
3) At an improper time, such as 'with a woman who has taken a vow, is pregnant or nursing a child, or in daylight'.
4) Too often, for example 'more than five successive times'.
5) In a generally improper way, such as by coercion, or with a man. (*The Jewel Ornament of Liberation by sGam Po Pa*, 1079–1153)

Similar injunctions are repeated in other authoritative sources, for example the *Upāsakaśīla-sūtra* (The *Sūtra* on Lay Precepts) translated into Chinese in the 5th century CE; the writings of Patrul Rinpoche (1808-1887); and Tsongkhapa's *Lamrim Chenmo* (Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment) completed in Tibet in 1402.

Apart from the third precept, other more general moral teachings also have a bearing on sexual behaviour. For example, the principle of *ahiṃsā* would require that one should not intentionally harm another person physically or emotionally, thus precluding rape, paedophilia, sexual harassment, and incest. Furthermore, all relationships should be informed by the virtues of loving-kindness (*mettā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). The 'Golden Rule' (Sn 705), as we saw in Chapter One, counsels to do nothing to others you would not like done to yourself. This is specifically applied to adultery, and it is said that just as you would not like another to commit adultery with your wife, you should not do it with another man's wife (SN v.354). Furthermore, the *sīla* (morality) component of the Eightfold Path relating to Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood imposes certain general restraints upon conduct, such as a requirement to speak the truth and be straightforward and honest in relationships, thereby precluding the lies and deceit common in extramarital affairs.

For those admitted to the monastic order, any kind of sexual activity—whether of a heterosexual or homosexual nature—is prohibited, and there are severe penalties for those who break the rules. Sexual intercourse is the

first of the four most serious monastic offences (*pārājika-dhamma*), and any monk or nun found guilty faces the penalty of permanent loss of communion with the Order. More minor offences, such as masturbation or lewd conduct, of which many cases are reported in the Vinaya, are punished less severely.

Marriage

While lay Buddhists are free to marry and have families, there is a clear sense in Buddhism that the lay estate is inferior to the monastic one and is a concession to those who are not yet able to sever the ties that bind them to the mundane world. Although there are exceptions, most notably in Japan where it is common for clergy to marry, the Buddhist ideal has always been to practice 'pure conduct' or *brahmacariya*. This means to abandon family life and live either alone or in a celibate community. As a candidate for such a community the Buddha provides the perfect role model: at the age of 29 he left the family home and remained celibate for the rest of his days. As was said of him, 'Abandoning unchastity, the ascetic Gotama lives far from it, aloof from the village practice of sex (*methunā*)' (DN i.4). This does not mean, however, that the Buddha became an asexual or androgynous being, and John Powers has drawn attention to many textual sources that depict the Buddha as manly and attractive (2012).

In Buddhism, marriage is essentially a secular contract in which the partners assume obligations towards one another. Unlike Christianity, marriage in Buddhism is not a sacrament, and monks do not officiate at wedding ceremonies. Monks are also prohibited by the *Vinaya* from playing the role of matchmaker or go-between in bringing couples together. Nevertheless, it is customary for newlyweds to attend the local monastery for a blessing. The various forms of marriage arrangements found among Buddhists are determined more by local custom than Buddhist teachings, and such matters are essentially the responsibility of the secular authorities.

While monogamy is the preferred and predominant model, there is much local variation in marriage patterns across the Buddhist world. Early texts mention a variety of temporary and permanent arrangements entered into for both emotional and economic reasons, and in different parts of Buddhist Asia both polygamy and polyandry have been (and still are) practised. Early sources like the *Vimānavatthu* (Stories of Heavenly Mansions) describe the challenges faced by the partners (particularly wives) in making a success of marriage, as well as pointing out the opportunities for merit-making such challenges present.

While there is no 'official' Buddhist marriage service, some Western Buddhists have developed their own by adapting elements from the Christian service. These include same-sex marriages, the first of which were performed at the Buddhist Church of San Francisco in the early 1970s. The Taiwanese Buddhist nun Bhikshuni Chao-Hwei has campaigned for gay marriage and

performed a marriage ceremony for a lesbian couple in 2012 (Fuller 2021, 126). Since Buddhism does not regard marriage as primarily a religious matter, it has no objection to divorce, but due to social pressures this is somewhat less common in Asian societies than in the West.

Misogyny

Feminist writers have drawn attention to misogyny in Buddhist teachings (Gross 1992). Buddhism teaches, for instance, that a female rebirth is inferior to rebirth as a male. A reason often cited for rebirth as a female is bad karma from a previous life. This belief has a particular implication with respect to the attainment of Buddhahood, for it is held that only a man can become a Buddha. This is because a Buddha possesses a special body featuring thirty-two 'marks', one of which is a penis contained in a sheath. The other marks include masculine features which collectively present the Buddha as a paragon of male beauty. These biological reasons are a barrier to a woman becoming a Buddha. In a conversation with Ānanda on ways in which a monk might be 'skilled in what is possible and impossible' the Buddha states as follows: 'It is impossible, it cannot happen that a woman could be an Accomplished One, a Fully Enlightened One—there is no such possibility.' The Buddha adds that it is also impossible that a woman could become a Wheel-turning monarch or one of the three powerful gods Sakka, Māra, or Brahmā (MN iii.65). Numerous similarly unflattering passages can be found in the *Jātakas* (Collett 2018).

There are more overtly misogynist passages that suggest women are inferior to men mentally, morally, and physically. In two short discourses about snakes, women (*mātugāma*) are compared to a black snake and described as follows:

> Bhikkhus, there are these five dangers in a black snake. What five? It is impure, foul-smelling, frightening, dangerous, and it betrays friends. These are the five dangers in a black snake. So too, there are these five dangers in women. What five? They are impure, foul-smelling, frightening, dangerous, and they betray friends. These are the five dangers in women. (AN iii.260)

The second discourse elaborates on these defects as follows:

> So too, there are these five dangers in women. What five? They are wrathful, hostile, of virulent venom, double-tongued, and they betray friends. 'Bhikkhus, this is how women are of virulent venom: for the most part they have strong lust. This is how women are double-tongued: for the most part they utter divisive speech. This is how women betray friends: for the most part they are adulterous. These are the five dangers in women.' (AN iii.261)

While the above passages are all taken from the Pali canon, similar passages can be found in the scriptures of the Mahāyāna. The following quotation from the *Bodhisattvabhūmi* (Bodhisattva Stages) of Asaṅga may serve as an example:

> Completely perfected Buddhas are not women. And why? Precisely because a bodhisattva, from the time he has passed beyond the first incalculable age (of his career) has completely abandoned the state of womanhood. Ascending (thereafter) to the most excellent throne of enlightenment, he is never again reborn as a woman. All women are by nature full of defilement and of weak intelligence. And not by one who is full of defilement and of weak intelligence is completely perfected Buddhahood attained. (Collett 2018, 560)

Counterbalancing these misogynistic passages are more positive descriptions of women which praise in particular their religious devotion, but it is hard to escape the impression that across the major Buddhist traditions women are seen as inferior to men.

Female ordination

A particular incident recorded in the Pali canon has continuing significance for the role of Buddhist women. Here, the Buddha is approached by his aunt Mahāpajāpatī who suggests 'it would be good if women could obtain the going forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the *Tathāgata*' (Vin ii.253-6; AN iv.274-9). The Buddha declines her request three times, and she leaves dejected. Undeterred, she later cuts off her hair, puts on an ochre robe, and with a number of other Sakyan women arrives in the presence of Ānanda 'with her feet swollen and her body covered with dust, miserable and saddened, weeping with a tearful face'.

Moved by her condition, Ānanda intercedes with the Buddha and poses the following hypothetical question: 'Bhante, if a woman were to go forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, would it be possible for her to realize the fruit of stream-entry, the fruit of once-returning, the fruit of non-returning, and the fruit of arahantship?' The Buddha confirms that it would indeed be possible for a woman renunciate to attain these elevated spiritual states. Ānanda then encourages the Buddha to grant Mahāpajāpatī's request to admit women to the *saṅgha*. The Buddha does so, but adds a caveat, namely that nuns must accept what he calls 'eight principles of respect' (*garudhamma*). These include things such as that the most senior nun must rise and pay respect to even the most junior monk, and that no nun must admonish a monk. Mahāpajāpatī accepts these condition, whereupon the Buddha makes the following rather gloomy prediction:

> If, Ānanda, women had not obtained the going forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, the spiritual life would have been of long duration; the good Dhamma would have stood firm even for a thousand years. However, Ānanda, because women have gone forth from the household life into homelessness in the Dhamma and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata, now the spiritual life will not be of long duration; the good Dhamma will last only five hundred years. (AN iv.278)

As an illustration as to why the Dhamma will not last as long, the Buddha then draws unflattering comparison with fields of rice and sugar cane that are attacked by blight, as follows:

> Just as, Ānanda, when a field of sugar cane has ripened, if the rusting disease attacks it, that field of sugar cane does not last long, so in whatever Dhamma and discipline women obtain the going forth from the household life into homelessness, that spiritual life does riot last long. (AN iv. 279)

Where do the misogynistic attitudes seen above arise from? Is Buddhism innately misogynist, or has the purity of its teachings been contaminated by the androcentrism of the surrounding Indian culture? The latter view has been advanced by Alice Collett, who claims that the misogyny evident in the sources has no basis in Buddhist doctrine or ethics. She sees it as having seeped into Buddhism from the surrounding culture. 'This is so much the case,' she writes, 'that an obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the ideas about female inferiority came into Buddhism through ingestion of norms and mores of traditional societies rather than as an integral part of Buddhist ontological or ideological principles' (2018, 552). She expands on this below:

> Given that the idea of women being inferior comes from the notion that female nature is the problem, and this is both undoctrinal and does not chime with Buddhist ethics nor the principles that underlie moral decision-making, this suggests that the negativity towards women and sporadic misogyny we come across in Pāli literature has likely found its way in via ingestion of the traditional (non-Buddhist) view of women found in ancient South Asian societies, rather than for a doctrinally motivated or ethically significant reason grounded in Buddhist principles or teaching. These possibilities represent two extremes, neither of which is likely to be correct. (2018, 559)

Collett is certainly right to point out that misogynist attitudes find no foundation in Buddhist doctrines like dependent origination and no-self. Later teachings like emptiness and Buddha-nature also seem to undercut the idea of there being some ontological difference between men and women. This suggests that misogyny is indefensible from a doctrinal point of view, but it does not go very far in explaining its presence in canonical sources. The Buddha and his early followers challenged social conventions like the caste system and the authority of the Brahmin priesthood, so presumably they could also have criticised the misogyny prevalent in Indian society had they wished to. One suggestion is that misogyny in Buddhism is due to prejudice on the part of male monastics who resented the intrusion of nuns and sought to strengthen their authority and control of monastic communities. The requirement for nuns to follow additional rules and defer to the male *saṅgha* seems to support this line of argument.

The campaign for gender equality today is carried on most actively by members of the engaged Buddhism movement. In our discussion of engaged Buddhism in Chapter Two, we made reference to the Sakyadhītā (Daughters of

the Buddha) organization which supports the campaign for female ordination. Historically, the female order has had a chequered career. It survives mainly in China and Korea but died out in India and Sri Lanka over a millennium ago. It was never successfully established in Tibet or southeast Asia. However, there are many female practitioners in these countries who follow a monastic style of life despite not being fully ordained. In Thailand they are known as *mae chi*, in Myanmar as *thilashin*, and in Sri Lanka as *dasa sil mata*. These women generally follow the ten precepts taken by novice monks. The chief barrier to the creation of an ordination lineage for nuns is a 'chicken and egg' problem. The initiation ceremony must be carried out by ordained nuns but given that the ordination lineages have died out there are no preceptors to perform the ceremony. Ordinations have been performed by nuns from other lineages, but often these are not recognized as valid. This is an issue on which Sakyadhītā continues to campaign actively.

Homosexuality

The issue of homosexuality has provoked heated debate between liberals and conservatives in many religious traditions. In Buddhism, while there has been ample discussion of the matter, tensions have not surfaced to the extent of threatening a schism as they have, for example, within some Christian denominations. The Buddha himself never passes judgement on the moral status of homosexual acts, and in early sources homosexuality is not discussed as a moral issue. Later commentators, however, express disapproval of same-sex relationships. Buddhaghosa speaks of the attraction of 'men for men' and 'women for women' as an example of decadence and moral decline (DA 853), yet same-sex attraction *per se* is not generally what the texts condemn.

As is the case with misogyny, Buddhist doctrines like dependent origination, no-self, emptiness, and Buddha-nature seem to provide no basis for discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. On the contrary, the virtues of tolerance and compassion seem to oppose it. We might think, therefore, that Buddhism would take a neutral stance towards homosexuality. In his exhaustive study of homosexuality, Jose Cabezón notes evidence of ambivalence but suggests Buddhism in general takes a liberal attitude. He writes:

> Despite the ambivalence concerning homosexuality in Buddhist history, the evidence seems to suggest that as a whole Buddhism has been for the most part neutral on the question of homosexuality. The principal question for Buddhism has not been one of heterosexuality vs. homosexuality but one of sexuality vs. celibacy. In this sense, homosexuality when condemned is condemned more for being an instance of sexuality than for being homos (involving partners of the same sex). (1998, 30)

In advancing this view the author suggests that Buddhism regards all sexual activity as on a par and to be discouraged for the same reason, namely that it stimulates desire. Nevertheless, as we saw when discussing the third precept, there is evidence that Buddhist commentators take heterosexual relations as normative and do not regard all sexual practices as morally equivalent. Non-reproductive sex in particular is singled out for censure. At both a textual and popular level there is not much evidence that homosexuality is regarded as simply an alternative form of sexual expression. In Asian societies like Thailand, for example, homosexuality is regarded as a karmic consequence of sexual immorality in a previous life, such as having been a prostitute or having abandoned a pregnant partner (Jackson 1998, 79). Clearly, such attitudes imply disapproval.

Homosexuality becomes contentious mainly in connection with admission to the Order. Certain types of people were not allowed to be ordained as monks, among them hermaphrodites (*ubhatobyañjanaka*) and a class of individuals known in the Pali texts as *paṇḍaka*s. It is not entirely clear who these were, but Peter Harvey concludes that the term denotes a type of 'sexually dysfunctional passive homosexual' male (2000, 434). Leonard Zwilling suggests that *paṇḍaka*s were 'a socially stigmatised class of passive, probably transvestite, homosexuals' (quoted in Harvey 2000, 416), while Cabezón, in the most exhaustive study of Buddhist sexuality to date, translates the term as 'queer person' (2017). An alternative suggestion is that *paṇḍaka*s were simply a class of males who suffered from a reproductive disorder involving the inability to produce or emit semen (Likhitpreechakul 2012).

However we understand the term, *paṇḍaka*s as a group were excluded from ordination by the Buddha following an incident of lewd conduct by one of their number (Vin i.85f.). In taking this decision, the Buddha's primary concern seems to have been to protect the reputation of the Order with the public at large, and there was no bar on the admission of non-practising homosexuals who did nothing to draw attention to their sexual orientation. The presence of gay monks in the Buddhist Order, however, has sometimes been a source of controversy. In July 2003 Phra Pisarn Thammapatee, one of Thailand's most famed monks, claimed there were about a thousand gays among the country's thirty thousand monks, an estimate others say is far too low. Whatever the actual number, he called for them to be expelled and for stricter screening of candidates for ordination. Expressing the view that those with 'sexual deviation' must be prevented from donning the saffron robes, he alleged that 'some homosexual monks have caused trouble in the temples'. Anti-gay rhetoric was also common in Asian countries as the HIV/AIDS pandemic developed through the 1980s.

During the 1990s, the Dalai Lama made a number of statements on sexual ethics in his writings and in public meetings that caused concern to members of the LGBTQ community in North America. Community leaders in the San

Francisco area asked for a meeting to clarify his views, and this took place in San Francisco in June 1997. In discussions the Dalai Lama affirmed the dignity and rights of gays and lesbians but stated that masturbation and oral or anal intercourse are improper activities and are proscribed for Buddhist practitioners.

Referring to authoritative texts of the kind cited earlier, the Dalai Lama stated that only the vagina should be used for sexual intercourse. He suggested that the purpose of sexuality as seen in India at the time was reproduction, which would explain why all sexual activity that cannot result in reproduction is proscribed. He himself stated, 'I think, basically, the purpose of sex is reproduction' (*World Tibet News*, 12 August 1997), and, as Janet Gyatso notes, Buddhism takes relations between a male and a fertile young woman as 'the gold standard for sex' (2005). This seems to be the normative understanding of the high tradition as expressed through the pens of learned commentators who seek to exclude sexual practices that are non-procreative. The justification for this is never made explicit but such practices were presumably seen as contrary to Dharma in some way, or perhaps their disapproval was such a pervasive feature of the surrounding cultures that their rejection called for little justification.

Some Buddhists argue that if prohibitions of the kind described were merely the product of historical conditions and local custom (often referred to as 'cultural baggage') they can safely be ignored by contemporary practitioners. The Dalai Lama has pointed out that Buddhist precepts take into account the time, culture, and society in which they originate. 'If homosexuality is part of accepted norms', he suggested, 'it is possible that it would be acceptable.' 'However,' he went on, 'no single person or teacher can redefine precepts. I do not have the authority to redefine these precepts since no one can make a unilateral decision or issue a decree.' In subsequent comments in 2014 the Dalai Lama commented that gay marriage is 'OK' and essentially a secular matter. He suggested that the prohibition on homosexual acts applies only to those who have taken the Buddhist precepts, and not to persons of other religions or none. However, he added that it is better for a Buddhist practitioner to engage in proscribed sexual activities if suppression of such desires would have more negative consequences, such as aggression or violence due to frustration. Other Tibetan teachers, meanwhile, have spoken more affirmatively about gay and lesbian relationships.

There have been times when same-sex relationships were celebrated in Buddhist cultures. For example, the *Nanshoku Okagami* (The Great Mirror of Male Love) is a collection of Japanese homoerotic Buddhist stories published in 1687. Historically, however, Buddhism has had little interest in what today are known as LGBTQ issues, being concerned mainly to persuade people to become celibate and renounce what texts call the 'village practice' of sexual intercourse. Engaged Buddhists, particularly those in the

West with liberal views, reject the disapproving attitudes found in primary sources and certain Asian cultures. They argue that discrimination has no place in Buddhism and that members of the LGBTQ community should be treated with tolerance and compassion.

Transgenderism

According to estimates, up to 2 per cent of the population are born with intersex characteristics (lower estimates are also found depending on how these characteristics are defined). Classical Buddhist sources hold that gender can change from one life to another, and whether one is born male, female, or hermaphrodite is due to karma from previous lives. There are also stories in the early sources of bodies changing gender within the same lifetime (Vin iii.35). The *Dhammapada* commentary narrates how the layman Soreyya changed from a man into a woman and then back again (Artinger 2021, 300). Such changes, however, were not seen as a hindrance to spiritual progress, which is Buddhism's primary concern. When a change of this kind happened to a monk or nun, they were simply reassigned to the branch of the *saṅgha* appropriate to their new gender. Nevertheless, such changes were almost always from male to female or vice versa, not from male or female to a non-binary gender. As Artinger notes:

> It is clear that sex-change within Pāli texts holds a very different function textually than that of the concerns and aims of present transgender persons. This is particularly the case due to the idea that sex-change, especially from male to female, is the result of profoundly negative actions in Buddhist texts. As such, it is necessary to separate sex-change as it occurs in Pāli texts with transitioning as it is experienced by trans people. (2021, 299)

She continues, 'It is necessary to make this distinction because I infer that when practitioners make the connection between sex-change and transgenderism they do so because they assume sex-change breaks out of this binary into a third-sex or more neutral state of being. It is clear that this is not the case' (2021, 301).

The best-known example of a change from male to female is the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. Avalokiteśvara takes on a feminine persona in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism as the saviouress Tārā, and in east Asia changes gender completely to become Guanyin. This example seems to endorse the view that gender was regarded as somewhat fluid, and that a change of gender was not in itself morally problematic. Those with an intersex identity, however, were seen as vulnerable to the carnal lusts of both sexes making religious progress more difficult. In Burma there are transvestite male ritual specialists known as *acault* who adopt stereotypical female behaviour following possession by the goddess Manguedon, and in Thailand the 'third gender' of *kathoey* (generally known as 'ladyboys') is well represented. In 2009, the winner of the transsexual 'Miss Tiffany Universe' beauty contest, Sorrawee 'Jazz'

Nattee, was ordained as a monk in southern Thailand. Jazz had lived as a woman for most of her adult life and had received breast implants but had never undergone transgender surgery. A condition of ordination was that Jazz 'detransition' by removal of the implants, which in the eyes of the *saṅgha* restored his original male condition.

Following scholars like Cabezón, Langenberg suggests that Buddhism's primary concern with sex was as a boundary marker between monasticism and lay life, and it was not concerned to distinguish 'correct' from 'deviant' sexuality. On this basis, engaged Buddhist writers continue to challenge the heteronormativity of the tradition, and work to undermine the rigid boundaries between male and female. Thus, Langenberg notes:

> Another vital conversation in contemporary Buddhism is fuelled by individuals expressing non-normative gender and sexual identities in Buddhist communities. American and European LGBTQI Buddhists have been reading traditional sources against their own visions of gender non-binary, non-gender conforming communities, and diverse sexual orientations and expressions (2018, 587).

Some scholars find in Buddhist philosophical teachings on emptiness, non-duality, and 'mind only', the foundation for a 'queer Dharma' that steers a 'middle way' between rigid binary positions and opens the door to recognition of more fluid gender roles. Thus, the argument goes, if in the last analysis there are no selves or essences, and all phenomena are conditioned, there seems no basis for a categorical distinction between genders. If all *dharmas* are 'empty,' as Mahāyāna sources often affirm, there can be no such thing as 'male' and female' *dharmas* (we noted above how this argument is also used as a critique of misogyny).

The same argument can be made using the notion of an underlying common 'Buddha nature' which all possess. It seems to follow that non-binary thinking is more in tune with Buddhist philosophy, leading to the conclusion that the Dharma is gender neutral. As Fuller sums it up, 'The Dharma is, in essence, queer, because of its non-essentialist philosophy' (2021, 125). Many LGBTQ Buddhists find it helpful to validate their queer identity on the basis of this anti-essentialism, and similar arguments can be used to oppose other forms of discrimination, such as on grounds of sexuality, race, or ethnicity.

Others may regard arguments of the above kind as fallacious in drawing moral conclusions from metaphysical premises. They resemble, it might be said, the argument that there are no differences between apples and oranges because at the sub-atomic level all fruits are merely particles and waves. The fallacy here is to assume that because a difference is not observed at one level of reality, it cannot exist at another. For the same reason, it is not persuasive to claim by appealing to the doctrine of 'two truths' that gender differences are not 'ultimately' valid, because the same can be said of most

aspects of our daily lives. The difference between green and red traffic lights may not be 'ultimately' valid since all colours are simply light waves, but to anyone driving a car it is a difference of considerable importance.

Engaged Buddhist LGBTQ movements also face a problem with karma. As noted, karma is often used to explain homosexuality and queerness by linking them to immoral conduct in a past life. One response to this is to 'naturalize' the concept of karma, in other words, to understand it as referring to normal everyday causation rather than as a retributive metaphysical force that operates across lifetimes. On this basis, a person's karma is simply another name for the results of the good and bad deeds people perform and the results they experience in this life. Thus, we may either live prudently or waste our talents and resources. The results of both kinds of actions are clearly visible and readily explicable: for example, the diligent student passes the exam while the lazy student fails it.

Buddhist 'modernists' understand karma in this way, and it has the advantage that the moralistic implications of the doctrine are exorcised. A person's gender identity will now not attract discriminatory judgment concerning misconduct in a previous life. A consequence of adopting this position, however, is that large tracts of scriptures will need to be reinterpreted or expunged from the canon, and once such an exercise is embarked on there is no telling where it might end. It could lead conceivably to the formation of a new engaged Buddhist canon in which only 'approved' texts and teachings were admitted. This in turn would require debates about the criteria for inclusion and could result in an ongoing winnowing process as new forms of discrimination are continually identified and offending passages removed.

In sum, historically the Buddhist approach to non-standard genders and sexual practices has been one of 'tolerance yet unacceptance'. While not overtly hostile to those with a non-normative gender identity the monastic tradition seems based around a heteronormative imperative, a stance Buddhist feminists like Rita Gross (1992) have characterized as androcentric and patriarchal. Certainly, there is little discussion in the sources of sexual ethics for women (Collins 2007; Collett 2013).

Sex abuse scandals

A number of Buddhist communities have been shaken by sexual abuse scandals reaching back to the 1980s. In 1984, Richard Baker resigned as abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center following revelations about sexual relationships with his students. In the early 1990s similar allegations appeared concerning Ösel Tendzin, the HIV-positive Regent of Vajradhatu, a Tibetan *saṅgha* established by Chogyam Trungpa. More recently, reports surfaced in 2014 that Zen master Joshu Sasaki Roshi of the Rinzai-ji Zen Center in Los Angeles was responsible for the abuse of hundreds of students. In 2017

accusations were made against a Tibetan lama, Norlha Rinpoche, founder of the Thubten Choling monastery in New York, alleging sexual relationships with students over decades. Around the same time, allegations of sexual impropriety at the 'Against the Stream Meditation Society' in California resulted in the resignation of its founder, Noah Levine. Levine denied the allegations but many of the organization's centres have since closed or changed their name.

Perhaps the most notorious case is that of Tibetan lama Sogyal Lakar Rinpoche, founder of the Rigpa community and author of the bestselling *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. In July 2017 eight long-term students accused the then 70-year-old lama (who died in 2019) of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse spanning several decades. Soon afterwards, in 2018, a group called 'The Buddhist Project Sunshine' issued a series of reports containing stories of abuse in Shambhala, an international group that follows the lama's teachings. These included allegations of sexual assault by the lama's son and spiritual heir Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. Rigpa's international board issued a statement in September 2018 saying, 'we feel deeply sorry and apologise for the hurt experienced by past and present members.' It promised to disassociate itself from Sogyal and remove those in leadership positions tainted by the scandal.

In the past some teachers have attempted to pass off their aberrant behaviour as a form of 'crazy wisdom', but this is no longer seen as a credible excuse. While the cases mentioned above occurred in the USA and Europe there have been similar cases in Asia. Recognizing the problem, Buddhist groups are responding by publishing ethics statements, setting out training and investigation protocols, and establishing formal grievance and complaints procedures (Gleig and Langenberg, forthcoming).

There is still much that remains unclear in Buddhist teachings on sexual ethics and many points that need to be more carefully explained or thought through. As traditional Buddhism encounters a hedonistic West where celibacy is not much in vogue and where self-identified communities with diverse sexual orientations and expressions are increasingly in evidence, this remains an important area for further investigation and dialogue.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Sex is regarded with suspicion as a source of desire and attachment. Sex is the proximate cause of rebirth, and 'birth' is the first link in the chain of dependent origination and the first example of suffering mentioned in the First Noble Truth. Because of its negative view of rebirth, some scholars see evidence of a deep strain of 'antinatalism' in Buddhism. As a corollary, they believe Buddhism takes a generally liberal view of homosexuality and other forms of non-procreative sexual activity. Historically, the Buddhist approach to non-standard genders and sexual practices has been one of 'tolerance yet unacceptance'.
- There is evidence of misogyny in traditional sources which state that women are by nature weak in wisdom, uncontrollable, greedy, and envious. However, more positive portrayals of women both in early sources and epigraphy are increasingly being highlighted by scholars. Buddhist doctrine also teaches that our natures are not fixed, and there is nothing essential about gender. The issue of *bhikṣunī* ordination is controversial, but some contemporary scholars believe there is no valid scriptural objection to the ordination of women.
- Homosexuality becomes problematic mainly in connection with admission to the Order. Certain types of people were not allowed to be ordained as monks, among them hermaphrodites and a class of individuals known in the Pali texts as *paṇḍaka*s.
- In many sources, Buddhas and bodhisattvas are depicted as possessing manly charisma which enhances their ability to attract beings to the Dharma. Some Mahāyāna sources even allow bodhisattvas to seduce devotees in order to establish them in the Dharma and dismiss such 'sins of lust' as minor transgressions.
- Tantric sexual yogas are designed to harness sexual energy to attain higher states of consciousness. Textual accounts of such practices may be metaphorical and symbolic rather than literal descriptions of actual activities. They mark an extreme point in the evolution of Buddhist attitudes towards sexuality.
- There have been multiple cases of sexual abuse in Dharma communities worldwide.

Discussion questions

1. Why does Buddhism view sex with such suspicion?
2. Is Buddhism misogynist?
3. Are scholars right to describe Buddhism as 'antinatalist'?
4. Does Buddhism approve of same-sex relationships?
5. Can the Buddha be seen as a sex symbol?
6. To what extent is Tantric sexual yoga a rejection of the early ideal of *brahmacariya*?

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Chapter Ten
Abortion

In this chapter

In Asian Buddhist countries abortion is not the controversial issue it is in the West. This may be because feminism has had less influence or because Buddhist leaders are reticent to comment publicly on reproductive matters. At a personal level, Buddhist monastics would rarely be called upon for guidance by the laity on matters of abortion or family planning. The *Vinaya* prohibits monks and nuns from any involvement in abortion, and the practice is generally understood as prohibited by the first of the five lay precepts. Despite the existence of restrictive laws in many countries, large numbers of abortions—many illegal—are performed each year. A distinctive development is a memorial service known as *mizuko kuyō* that became popular in Japan from the late 1970s in response to the 'abortion boom' in that country. In the West, a more liberal stance is often adopted, and some commentators argue that abortion can be justified in certain circumstances.

When does life begin?

The Buddhist belief in rebirth adds a new dimension to the issue of abortion. Buddhism does not postulate a starting point to the series of lives lived by an individual, and conception marks the rebirth of a previously existing person. Some schools of Buddhism teach that rebirth follows instantaneously upon death, while others believe there is an intermediate state which functions as a buffer between lives. The Theravāda holds the former view and sees death and rebirth as a seamless continuum. It pictures the transition between lives as 'like a man who crosses a river by hanging onto a rope tied to a tree on the near bank' (Vism 554). The Tibetan tradition, on the other hand, believes there is an intermediate state of up to 49 days between one life and the next known as the *bardo* (interval).

The three conditions

Although the Buddhist position on when individual life begins was formulated over two thousand years ago, the conclusions reached are in many respects remarkably modern. Buddhism has always taught that conception marks the start of a natural process of development leading to birth, childhood, and maturity. The Buddha explained conception as a natural process which occurs when a specific set of conditions is fulfilled. In the passage below the Buddha sets out three conditions for the consciousness of a deceased person, referred to as the 'being to be reborn' (*gandhabba*), to enter a womb and embark upon a new human life.

> Bhikkhus, the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place through the union of three things . . . [1] When there is the union of the mother and father, and [2] it is the mother's season, and [3] the being to be reborn is present, through the union of these three things the conception of an embryo in a womb takes place. (MN i.256)

The three conditions to be fulfilled are therefore: 1) intercourse must take place; 2) it must be the woman's fertile period; 3) there must be a being available to be reborn. Once consciousness has entered the womb and conception has occurred, the embryo develops through a set number of stages. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* lists four stages of the early embryo during the first month after conception (SN i.206). The first stage is the *kalala*, in which the tiny embryo is described by Buddhaghosa as 'clear and translucent' and likened to 'a drop of purest oil on the end of a hair' (Vsm 552). The following three stages are the *abudda*, the *pesi*, and the *ghana*, terms which connote increasing density and solidity.

We saw above that the Buddha states that three conditions are required for conception. We can see that the entry into the womb of the being to be reborn cannot take place until all three conditions are fulfilled, but what is not entirely clear is whether the entry is triggered immediately the conditions are met. In other words, is the entry simultaneous with the fulfilment of the three conditions, or can it occur subsequently, and if so, when? The Buddha does not say there is any delay, and although rather forced, it would be possible to construe the Buddha's statement as meaning that the entry of the being to be reborn could occur later. If we translate this into modern terms it would mean that fertilised ova can exist which have not been animated by the consciousness of a being to be reborn. This interpretation would offer a possible justification for abortion up to a certain point, a possibility we will say more about below.

What modifications are required to the traditional conception and embryology in the light of modern scientific knowledge? Although the three conditions announced by the Buddha are still valid, we suggest that if he were making his statement today, he would make reference to two conditions rather than three. These would be that conception takes place when i) the ovum is fertilised by the sperm; and ii) an intermediate being is available to be reborn. These two conditions would apply to conception in the normal manner through sexual intercourse and also to *in vitro* fertilization, where conception takes place in the laboratory.

Abortion

Given that fertilization is believed to be the point at which individual human life commences, abortion is widely seen as contrary to the first precept. Abortion is also prohibited by the *Vinaya* (the third *pārājika*) which under the prohibition on taking a human life (*manussa-viggaha*) explicitly mentions abortion.

> An ordained monk should not intentionally deprive a living thing of life even if it is only an ant. A monk who deliberately deprives a human being of life, even to the extent of causing an abortion, is no longer a follower of the Buddha. As a flat stone broken asunder cannot be put back together again, a monk who deliberately deprives a human being of life is no longer a follower of the Buddha. (Vin i.97)

The *Vinaya* commentary explains that the prohibition applies from the first moment when consciousness (*viññāna*)arises in the womb. The term 'human being' is defined as follows:

> A human being [exists] in the interval between the first moment when mind arises in the mother's womb [that is to say] the first manifestation of consciousness (*viññāna*), and death. (Vin iii.73)

This suggests that a human being comes into existence at conception. Buddhaghosa expands on the above statement as follows:

> By the phrase *the first moment when mind arises in the mother's womb* is shown the complete (*sakala*) reinstatement of the five aggregates. So the very first moment of existence in human form consists of that first moment of mind, with its three associated immaterial aggregates [i.e. *vedanā*, *saññā*, and *saṅkhāra*] and the [material] body (*rūpa*) of the embryo (*kalala*) which is generated along with it.

The passage goes on to make clear that the offence applies to the destruction of human life at any time between conception and death:

> The individual being (*attabhava*) begins from this tiny substance [and] gradually grows old with a natural lifespan of up to one hundred and twenty years. Throughout all of this until death, such is a human being. [The phrase] *who should deprive it of life* means 'separating from life' either at the stage of the embryo (*kalala*) by scorching, crushing, or the use of medicine, or at any subsequent stage by some similar kind of assault. (VA ii.437f)

Abortion in the *Vinaya*

Seven cases of abortion are reported in the *Vinaya* (Vin iii.83f). In all cases where the abortion brings about the death of the child as intended, the judicial decision is that the offence falls into the category of 'depriving a human being of life.' There was no reduction in the gravity of the offence by virtue of the fact that the victim was a child *in utero* as opposed to a child already born or an adult. No forensic significance seems to have been attached to the particular gestational phase of the fetus, and there is no indication in the text or in the commentary that the offence became graver as the fetus approached full term. We have seen that early Buddhism distinguished several stages of embryonic development, but there is no evidence that this classification was relevant from a moral or legal perspective. The above canonical and commentarial evidence from the Monastic Rule is consistent with the conclusions we reached in our discussion of conception. We saw

there that human life was thought to begin at fertilization, and it is logical, therefore, that the offence of depriving a human being of life should apply from this point.

The victim and the gravity of the offence

There is evidence in some sources to suggest that the gravity of an offence varies in accordance with the nature of the victim. This is not an unreasonable position. For example, while all killing is wrong, we might regard the slaying of a child, one's parents, a Buddha, or the president of a country, as particularly egregious examples of homicide and meriting a greater penalty. A factor sometimes mentioned as relevant to abortion is the victim's physical size, which seems to derive from the following comment by Buddhaghosa:

> Taking life in the case of [beings such as] animals and so forth which are without virtue (*gunavirahita*) is a minor sin if they are small and a great sin if they are large. Why? Because of the greater effort required. In cases where the effort is identical, the offence may be worse due to greater size. Among [beings such as] humans and so forth who have virtue (*gunavant*), it is a minor sin to kill a being of small virtue but a great sin to kill a being of great virtue. Where both bodily size and virtue are the same, it is a minor sin if the wickedness (*kilesa*) involved and the assault itself are moderate, and a great sin if they are extreme. (MA i.198)

An important point to note is that Buddhaghosa's discussion of size does not relate to human beings. He states quite clearly: 'Taking life in the case of [beings such as] animals . . . is a minor sin if they are small and a great sin if they are large.' Only after discussing considerations of size and effort does he turn to the case of humans and say: 'Among [beings such as] humans . . . it is a minor sin to kill a being of small virtue but a great sin to kill a being of great virtue.' The two categories of humans and animals, and the related criteria (size and virtue) are thus quite separate. The point to grasp is that greater size is an aggravating factor *only when the victim is an animal*. When the victim is a human, the relevant criteria is virtue, which is why it would be worse to kill a Buddha than an ordinary person. Apart from textual considerations, logic drives us to the same conclusion. The alternative would lead to the absurd conclusion that it is less serious to kill small people (like children) than large people (like adults). We saw, moreover, that in his commentary on the offence of taking human life in the *Vinaya* Buddhaghosa nowhere mentions the size of the fetus as having any bearing on the gravity of the offence.

Despite the condemnation of abortion, it is clear from the cases in the *Vinaya* that monks were sometimes involved in procuring abortions. In ancient India, as in many societies, religious practitioners adopted the roles of counsellors, soothsayers, and physicians, and were consulted by their clientele on a variety of matters of which the age-old problem of an unwanted

pregnancy was one. The reasons mentioned for seeking abortions are varied. They include concealing extramarital affairs, preventing inheritances, and domestic rivalry between co-wives. As an example of the last, a story from the *Dhammapada* commentary tells how a senior wife, who was barren, tricked a junior one into repeatedly aborting to preserve her seniority in the family. The story goes on to describe the evil consequences which pursued the elder wife in future lives (DhA i.45f).

There appear to be no examples in Buddhist literature of abortion performed for medical reasons. It seems likely, however, that early Buddhism would share the view of Hindu jurists that abortion was morally permissible if necessary to save the life of the mother. Overall, then, there is nothing distinctive about the Buddhist position on abortion in the context of India in the Buddha's day. Pre-Buddhist Indian sources dating from as early as 1200 BCE condemn abortion and stress the moral inviolability of the fetus (Lipner 1989, 43).

Liberal views

Coming forward in time, some contemporary authors, mainly in the West, adopt a more liberal approach to abortion. Writing from an engaged Buddhist perspective, Ken Jones describes abortion as a 'dilemma' for Buddhism, given that it is both profoundly compassionate and yet counsels against all killing. In his book *The Social Face of Buddhism*, he cites opinions on abortion from two well-known Western Zen Masters, Philip Kapleau and Robert Aitken. Both *roshis* refrain from any definite judgement on the morality of abortion. Roshi Kapleau suggests that the practice of zazen will disclose the 'right' course of action (Jones 1989, 176f). Elsewhere, Kapleau writes that 'abortion is a grave matter', adding 'There is no absolute right or wrong, no clear-cut solution' (quoted in Lecso 1987, 215).

The suggestion by these writers appears to be that Buddhism has no clear stance on abortion, but the traditional sources show little evidence of uncertainty or ambivalence on this question. The Buddha seems to have held that an objective appraisal of moral choices on matters of this kind is indeed possible. At one point he tells Ānanda that he is not a teacher who (to use a modern idiom) 'tiptoes around the issues,' but one who repeatedly restrains and admonishes his disciples (MN iii.118). Elsewhere it is made clear that the aim of Buddhism is to give clear guidance so that a person can put doubt behind her (*tiṇṇavicikiccha*) and know for sure what is morally right (*akathaṃkathī kusalesu dhammesu*) (MN i.346).

In a departure from the traditional position, pro-choice arguments have been advanced independently by two Western authors. In discussing 'a western approach' to abortion, James Hughes suggests that the Buddhist attitude has never been to follow scripture slavishly, but 'to continually adapt

the Dharma to new audiences' (1999). Thus, he suggests that while texts may form part of the dialogue, they cannot be allowed to be the dominant voice. For one thing, their conclusions may be based on information which has been shown to be inaccurate in the light of scientific discoveries, and for another they may embody attitudes which are now simply out of date.

Hughes proposes a form of moral Particularism in terms of which Buddhism contains a variety of different 'moral logics', and that it is up to the individual to choose the right one in a particular case. Suggesting that 'clear and defensible distinctions can be made between fetuses and other human life,' he finds the moral logic of utilitarianism persuasive in the context of abortion, although tempered by the requirements of a 'virtue ethic' which takes into account the mindset of the actors. Abortion may therefore be allowable where the intention is compassionate, and the act achieves the best outcome for all concerned (it is unclear how the best outcome is to be determined). Liberal positions are also advocated by Gross (2010), Pipob (2000), and Tworkov (1992).

The 'interests' view

The most detailed pro-choice argument to date has been advanced by Michael Barnhart. This argument draws on the 'interest view' developed by feminist philosopher Bonnie Steinbock. The argument here is that only beings that are sentient (meaning that feel pain and pleasure) have an interest in their well-being. Sentiency, Barnhart suggests coincides with the onset of consciousness in the third trimester around 20-26 weeks into the pregnancy. Before this time, the fetus can have no 'interests,' and so abortion is a relatively minor matter. The arising of sentiency after this time marks the onset of moral status, after which time the rights of the fetus must be taken into consideration (but not given priority) in relation to any decision to abort. If the interests of the mother outweigh those of the fetus then an abortion would still be morally justified.

A weakness with this position, as Barnhart points out, is that if moral status depends on sentiency, then people who are asleep or in a coma would lose their moral status during such episodes. To avoid this implication, Barnhart adds the requirement that interests must already be part of the agent's 'dispositional pool' as represented in the form of pre-existing 'desires and beliefs.' These would be interests that were formed before the state of unconsciousness supervened. Even a person who has died, he suggests, could be said to have such continuing interests as expressed in their will. A fetus, however, would be excluded because never having been conscious it could never have formed the required interests. (This seems to overlook the fact that according to Buddhism a newly conceived fetus is the bearer of a dispositional pool of interests from a previous life.)

On this more permissive 'modified' Buddhist view, the entry of the *gandhabba* coincides with the onset of consciousness some twenty or more weeks into gestation. Up to this point abortion is permissible since the fetus is not sentient and having no interests lacks moral status. From this point on abortion is still morally permitted but justification is required. A problem is that this logic appears to justify not only abortion but also infanticide. Thus, if the interests of the mother can outweigh those of a fetus before birth, presumably they can also outweigh the interests of a baby or an infant, particularly if it turned out that the child was handicapped.

Moreover, a textual problem for this argument is that the Buddha states that mind and body cannot develop in the absence of *viññāna.* Below, he describes to Ānanda how the entry of consciousness (*viññāna*) into the womb triggers and sustains the development of life:

> I have said: 'Consciousness conditions mind-and-body' . . . If consciousness were not to come into the mother's womb, would mind-and-body develop there? 'No, Lord.' 'Or if consciousness, having entered the mother's womb, were to be deflected, would mind-and-body come to birth in this life?' 'No, Lord.' 'And if the consciousness of such a tender young being, boy or girl, were thus cut off, would mind-and-body grow, develop and mature?' 'No, Lord.' 'Therefore, Ānanda, just this, namely consciousness, is the root, the cause, the origin, the condition of mind-and-body. (DN ii.62f).

It seems clear from this statements that the mind-body complex cannot develop in the absence of *viññāna*. Furthermore, in the 'Sheaves of Reeds Discourse' (*Nalakalapiya Sutta*, SN 12), the mental and material dimensions of individuality are compared to two sheaves of reeds that lean on one another for support and cannot stand independently (Cf. Vsm 595). The possibility of a fetus developing as far as the third trimester in the absence of *viññāna* therefore seems to be ruled out, and if consciousness (*viññāna*) and sensation (*vedanā*) are present from conception it seems the fetus already fulfils the criteria for having 'interests.'

The main drawback with locating the entry of *viññāna* into the womb at a point later than conception, then, is the dualistic implication that an individual's biological nature can antedate its existence as a composite being. Here one part (the biological) would have a longer history than the other (the psychic) in the course of the same life. However, traditional Buddhist teachings on the interdependence of the material and spiritual aspects of human nature suggest that the two arise simultaneously rather than one after the other. If we have read it correctly, the Buddha's statement on the 'conjunction of three' implies that conception and intercourse are simultaneous, or nearly so.

Science has shown that the two are not exactly simultaneous, and that fertilization normally takes place from within five minutes to an hour after intercourse. Again, we must allow for the ignorance of our sources about

this aspect of the process. The discovery of ovulation in the 1920s introduces a complication which they could not have been aware of. In view of the importance attached to the act of sexual intercourse in the early accounts, however, an explanation which located fertilization as close to the time of intercourse as possible is to be preferred to one which places it at a more remote time. All subsequent developments in the history of the individual in the present life can be traced back to this point but not beyond it. It is difficult to wish for a clearer point of origin, and fertilization seems the most likely candidate for the point at which new life begins. This suggests that *viññāna* in some sense orchestrates the evolution of the physical body and its presence is required for the development of a human embryo beyond a very early stage. An embryo which was not animated (which lacked *viññāna*) would not have the ability to evolve and most probably would be lost in the menstrual cycle.

Looking beyond Pali sources for a moment, the evidence from Tibetan sources like *The Ambrosia Heart Tantra* seems to confirm the supposition that conception occurs at, or soon after, intercourse. The text compares intercourse to the rubbing together of two pieces of wood, and conception to the generation of fire (Kelsang 1977, 47). Fire cannot be produced when the two sticks are apart, which suggests that conception was thought to occur during intercourse. The same text provides another helpful image using the generation of fire to explain how conception occurs: 'The mother's blood may be likened to a flint, the father's sperm to the iron, the consciousness that enters the mixture to a piece of bark and the embryo to the fire' (Kelsang 1977, 47).

Conception is here likened to the production of fire using flint, iron, and bark. Perhaps the modern equivalent would be a gas cigarette lighter, in which flint, grinding wheel and fuel interact to produce a flame. Intercourse is then like the striking together of flint and iron. While this process will create a spark it will not, in the absence of combustible material, produce fire. Only when the gas (representing the consciousness of a person seeking rebirth) is present will the conditions needed to create fire be fulfilled. This image lends support to the view that conception was thought to occur simultaneously with intercourse, since fire cannot be produced unless all three elements interact at one-and-the-same time. It also suggests that the fusion of mind and body (*nāma* and *rūpa*) is instantaneous in the way that a flame bursts into life.

A final general justification for abortion often mentioned by those who adopt a liberal view is a compassionate desire to reduce suffering (Barnhart 2018, 606f). Apart from familiar problems about predicting and measuring how suffering will be reduced (and deciding whose suffering is to be taken into account) Buddhist teachings do not condone the reduction of suffering by any means. Barnhard approvingly quotes Steinbock's example of the

selective abortion of girls in misogynist cultures, describing this as an 'eminently defensible' example of compassionate concern (2018, 609). He suggests Buddhists would approve of such a measure because it would avoid the suffering associated with mistreatment and discrimination against women in later life. Feminist writer Rita Gross, however, strongly disagrees, noting that gender abortions 'could never be acceptable to Buddhists' (2010, 87). To reduce suffering by killing the sufferer seems a drastic and ultimately futile measure that misunderstands the role of suffering in Buddhist teachings. The Buddha taught that suffering is inherent in life, and that the way to end it was not by temporary suppression but by following a path of virtue (the Eightfold Path) that leads to a permanent solution in final nirvana. This path, of course, does not sanction the intentional killing of living beings.

Abortion in Buddhist countries

We saw above that traditional sources strongly disapprove of abortion. In contemporary practice, however, there is much deviation from the norm and a fair amount of 'moral dissonance' whereby individuals experience themselves as pulled in opposing directions. This dissonance is reflected in the legal position on abortion in Asian countries with large Buddhist populations. Thus, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Bhutan have restrictive policies which allow abortion only to save the life of the mother. In South Korea (Tedesco 1999; 2004) abortion is allowed to preserve the mother's physical health (a restriction that is interpreted very liberally), and in Thailand abortion is permitted to preserve both the mother's physical and mental health. Special conditions may apply in these countries in cases of rape, incest, and foetal abnormality. In Japan and Taiwan abortion is permitted for socio-economic reasons, and there are no legal restrictions whatsoever in Cambodia, Nepal, and Vietnam. In the following section we review in more detail the situation in two of the countries mentioned, Thailand and Japan. These countries have been chosen because they provide illustrations from north and south Asia in countries that follow the Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism respectively.

Thailand

As is common in the more conservative Buddhist countries of south Asia abortion is illegal in Thailand with certain limited exceptions. The *Thai Criminal Code* imposes strict penalties: a woman who causes an abortion for herself or procures one from someone else can expect to face a penalty of three years in prison, a fine, or both. The penalty for the abortionist is even greater: five years, a fine, or both, and if the woman is injured or killed in the process the penalties are more severe. Following a reform of the law in 1957 abortion is only permitted in cases of rape, incest, or sexual crimes, or when necessary to save the mother's life. Campaigns for liberalization have so far been unsuccessful.

Official statistics massively underestimate the number of abortions performed because illegal abortions are very common, with thousands of such procedures a year performed in the many hundreds of illegal abortion clinics found throughout the country and particularly in rural areas. As Robert Florida notes:

> While the numbers do not exactly coincide from study to study, they all confirm that the abortion rate in Thailand is rather high, probably in the range of around 300,000 per year, or at a rate of 37 abortions per 1,000 women of childbearing age. 34 To compare with other countries, some other rates for the same period were: Canada 11.1, Hungary 35.3, Japan 22.6 officially, but probably between 65 and 90, Singapore 44.5, USA 24.2, and USSR an incredible 181. (1999, 23)

According to a 1987 study, the majority of abortions (around 80–90 per cent) were performed for married woman, mostly agricultural workers. The study also confirmed that abortion was the accepted method of birth control among these women, suggesting that if better contraception was available the number of abortions would drop sharply (Florida 1999, 23).

Despite the basic religious objection to abortion, Thai attitudes towards the issue are complex and researchers often encounter contradictory positions. A 1998 survey mainly of medical staff revealed ambivalent attitudes, with most respondents reporting negative feelings after the procedure, including 36 per cent who were concerned about the bad karma likely to result from it. While nearly all medical staff supported abortions for women who had been raped, who were HIV positive, or who had contracted German measles in the first trimester of pregnancy, 70 per cent were opposed to abortion on socio-economic grounds. Similarly, while a very high proportion of those surveyed viewed abortion as a threat to Thai values, 55 per cent of the medical staff favoured a liberalization of Thai abortion laws. This ambivalence is reflected in a study of Thai attitudes by Suwanbubbha that concludes that 'although abortion is not morally justifiable there is still the possibility for alternative and deliberate choices' (2003, 161).

As is common in Asian countries, the Thai *saṅgha* adopts a low profile on abortion. With very rare exceptions, monks do not picket abortion clinics, go on protest marches, or counsel women who are considering having an abortion, as clergy or support groups in the West might do. This is not because they have no position on the matter, and the *saṅgha* is widely perceived as belonging to the conservative wing that opposes abortion law reform.

Japan

Elsewhere in Asia, attitudes and practices relating to abortion vary quite widely. In Japan (where Buddhism has been influential but is not the state religion), abortion is legal and some 300,000 abortions are performed each year, roughly the same number as in Thailand. The issue of abortion has

been particularly acute in Japan because the contraceptive pill was not widely available until 1999, largely because of concerns about side effects (some allege these concerns were deliberately exaggerated by the medical profession). In the absence of effective prevention an 'abortion boom' ensued, and an efficient (and profitable) abortion industry emerged to deal with the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Japanese society also evolved a strategy for coping with the anxiety such situations create in the form of the *mizuko kuyō* memorial service for aborted children. The ritual became extremely popular in the 1970s when the number of abortions peaked at a million or more per annum according to some estimates.

Japanologist William LaFleur explains how traditional Japanese culture conceptualizes the fetus as a being whose existence is fluid and indeterminate. A fetus or young child is thought to exist partly in the human world and partly in the spirit world at a point where the boundary between the two is ill-defined and easy to cross. Against this background, abortion could be seen as a less serious matter than otherwise. It can be argued, for example, that it does not involve the killing of a 'full' human being since the spirit is not yet completely committed to human existence. LaFleur writes:

> The child who has become a *mizuko* has gone quickly from the warm waters of the womb to another state of liquidity. Life that has remained liquid simply has never become solidified. The term suggests that a newborn, something just in the process of taking on 'form,' can also rather quickly revert to a relatively formless state. (1992, 24)

In terms of this belief, abortion can be seen not so much as the destruction of life as its postponement, a gentle nudging of the fetus back into the world of the gods (*kami*) from whence it came. 'Since the newborn or the fetus was often referred to as *kami no ko* or a "child of the gods"', writes LaFleur, 'it became possible to see a forced return of that child to the sacred world as something within the realm of moral possibility' (1992, 40).

Mizuko literally means 'water child,' and *kuyō* means a ritual or ceremony. The *mizuko kuyō* service is generally a simple one in which a small figure of the bodhisattva Jizō represents the departed child. Jizō Bosatsu is a popular bodhisattva in Japan. He is regarded as the protector of young children, and statues and shrines to him are found throughout the country. He is often shown dressed in the robes of a monk carrying a staff with six rings on it, which jingle like a child's rattle. The rings represent the six realms of rebirth in traditional Buddhist teachings, and Jizō visits each of these realms to help those in need.

Jizō's origins lie in India as the bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, but when his cult reached Japan, he became associated with a folk-belief concerning the fate of children who die young, known as *mizuko* or 'water babies'. Such children were thought to go to an underworld or realm of the shades, a limbo where

they awaited rebirth. In the popular imagination, this place was identified with a deserted riverbank called Sai-no-kawara which marks the boundary between this life and the next. There, the children seek to amuse themselves by day playing with pebbles on the beach, but when night comes, they become cold and afraid, and it is then that Jizō comes to enfold them in his robe and cheer them with the jingling sound of his staff. This scene is often depicted in statues and recited in hymns during the *mizuko kuyō* ritual.

In the ritual, a small image of Jizō (known as a *mizuko Jizō*) is often decorated with a child's bib, and pinwheels and toys are placed alongside. Traditionally, the image would be placed in the home or at a small roadside shrine, but in modern times specialist temples such as the Hasedera temple in Kamakura have offered commemorative services of various degrees of sophistication. These temples resemble memorial parks or cemeteries, with rows of small statues each commemorating a terminated pregnancy or miscarriage. The *mizuko kuyō* ceremony can take many forms but would typically involve the parents and sometimes other members of the family erecting an image of Jizō and paying their respects by bowing, lighting a candle, striking gongs, chanting verses or a hymn, and perhaps reciting a short Buddhist *sūtra* such as the *Heart Sūtra*. It is also customary to provide a memorial tablet and a posthumous Buddhist name, which allows the deceased child to be recognized within the family structure. The rite may be repeated at intervals, such as on the anniversary of the abortion.

The public nature of the *mizuko kuyō* ceremonial simultaneously acknowledges the child that has been lost and helps those involved come to terms with the event on an emotional level. Women who have the ritual performed find it consoling, and it is clearly comforting to think that Jizō is protecting their lost offspring. Many Western women who learn about *mizuko kuyō* feel the rite could be beneficial, and Jeff Wilson has explored how *mizuko kuyō* has been adapted for use in an American context (2009).

The rite, however, is not without its critics. The majority of Buddhist organizations in Japan do not endorse *mizuko kuyō*, regarding it as a modern innovation based on questionable theology and lacking any basis in the *sūtras*. One of the largest Buddhist organizations in Japan, the Jōdō Shinshū, actively opposes the rite for this reason, pointing out that according to orthodox Buddhist teachings a ritual cannot wipe away the bad karma caused by an abortion. Some unscrupulous temples in Japan have also exploited the ritual commercially, promoting the idea of *tatari*, or retribution sought by departed spirits. The idea has been put about, often accompanied by lurid pictures, that an aborted fetus becomes a vengeful spirit that causes problems for the mother unless placated by the ritual. Undoubtedly, many temples saw the ritual simply as a money-making scheme and exploited vulnerable women (Hardacre 1997).

Opposition on the part of the Jōdō Shinshū and others, however, has not taken a political form, and Japanese Buddhists have not campaigned to change the law on abortion or sought to influence the practice of the medical profession. Japan has not seen the picketing or attacks on abortion clinics that have taken place in the USA. Buddhism recognizes that the pressures and complexities of life can cloud the judgement and lead people to make wrong choices. The appropriate response in these cases, however, is thought to be compassion and understanding rather than condemnation.

As noted, some Buddhists, especially in the West, feel that there is more to be said on the morality of abortion than is found in the ancient sources, and that there may be circumstances in which abortion is justified. For one thing, early Buddhist attitudes were formulated in a society that took a very different view of the status of women. Feminist writers have drawn attention to the patriarchal nature of traditional societies and to the institutionalized repression of women down the centuries. It has also been argued that abortion rights are integral to the emancipation of women and are necessary to redress injustice. Buddhists who are sympathetic to this view and who support the demand for 'reproductive rights' may recommend meditation and discussion with a Buddhist teacher as ways in which the woman can come to a decision in harmony with her conscience. As the encounter between Buddhism and Western values proceeds, discussions over the ethics of abortion look certain to continue.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- A key question in the abortion debate in the West has been 'when does life begin?' Given its belief in rebirth, Buddhism brings a new perspective to this question. It is unclear, however, whether this perspective makes much difference to the moral issue. No-one suggests, for instance, that the killing adults is less serious because they will be reborn.
- The Buddha stated that new life comes into being at (or close to) the time of intercourse. This is in keeping with the scientific view that fertilization is the point of origin of a new genetically unique individual. Most Buddhists believe that the first precept applies from this point, and the equivalent *Vinaya* rule also takes this view. The *Vinaya* reports that monks were expelled for performing abortions.
- Buddhaghosa holds that the five aggregates come into being at conception, but it is not clear whether all schools share this view. Buddhaghosa also mentions size as a criterion of moral seriousness, but this only applies to the killing of animals, not human beings.
- Michael Barnhart has argued that a fetus is not a full 'moral person' because it lacks 'interests,' which depend on capacities like sentiency (the ability to feel pleasure and pain), self-awareness and rationality. An opponent might respond that criteria such as self-awareness, sentiency, and rationality are arbitrary and difficult to define. These capacities are constantly evolving, and a new-born baby would also lack many of them, thus permitting infanticide as well as abortion.
- Large numbers of legal and illegal abortions take place in Asian countries. Estimates for Thailand put the number at 300,000 per annum. In Japan the number may have peaked at over a million (by comparison, in the USA there are just under one million abortions per annum). In Japan the *mizuko kuyō* memorial service for aborted children became popular in the 1960s and 1970s and has since spread to the West.

Discussion questions

1. When does life begin?
2. Is there a Buddhist 'middle way' on abortion?
3. How does a person with 'interests' (a 'moral person') differ from a 'human being'?
4. Is a late abortion worse than an early one? Why?
5. Why did the *mizuko kuyō* memorial service become so popular in Japan?
6. On which of these grounds (if any) could abortion be justified on Buddhist principles? i) threat to the mother's mental health; ii) threat to the mother's physical health; iii) fetal handicap (e.g., Down's syndrome); iv) rape; v) socio-economic factors.

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Chapter Eleven
Euthanasia

In this chapter

Here we explore the Buddhist perspective on euthanasia in the light of scriptural teachings and contemporary opinions. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first part defines euthanasia and includes a discussion of views expressed by contemporary Tibetan teachers. The second discusses two moral values often invoked in support of euthanasia, namely autonomy and compassion. The third considers how euthanasia is regarded in early textual sources, and the fourth provides a brief survey of contemporary attitudes to euthanasia in Japan and Thailand. The conclusion will be that euthanasia is contrary to Buddhist teachings in that it involves intentional killing contrary to the first precept. Buddhists rarely call for the legalization of euthanasia: their concerns centre instead on 'dysthenasia', or the unnecessary prolongation of the dying process. In response to this concern, it will be suggested that Buddhism imposes no obligation to preserve life at all costs.

Introduction

As is well known, Buddhism is made up of a collection of sects and schools, many of which evolved during a variety of historical periods in different cultures. While this may be thought to make consensus on euthanasia unlikely, the evidence suggests that a common position can be discerned. To help define this position we will draw on two main sources. The first is the corpus of religious texts which all Buddhist monastics regard as authoritative, namely the Monastic Rule or *Vinaya*. As Paul Williams notes, 'What unifying element there is in Buddhism, Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna, is provided by the monks and their adherence to the monastic rule'. 'Thus,' he concludes, 'in spite of the considerable diversity in Buddhism there is relative unity and stability in the moral code' (1989, 4-6). What is especially valuable about the *Vinaya* is that it records actual cases of euthanasia and assisted suicide on which the Buddha passes judgment, thus providing a precedent for contemporary practice. The *Vinaya* will therefore be the primary source to be consulted when we consider textual evidence below.

The second source we will draw on is a short review (inevitably limited but hopefully representative) of contemporary attitudes and practice in two Asian countries with large Buddhist populations, namely Japan and Thailand. It seems desirable to include this contemporary perspective so that modern views are represented in the discussion. There are two reasons for choosing

Japan and Thailand: first, there is more published information available on these countries, and—as with the discussion of abortion in the last chapter—they provide examples of Mahāyāna and Theravāda perspectives.

Apart from the question of sources, a more general concern is whether the parameters of the Western debate on euthanasia can be taken as universal. In the West the issue is seen largely as one of individual rights (specifically the 'right to die'), whereas in Asia the issue is framed more in terms of family duties and obligations. Counterbalancing cultural differences of this kind are features which facilitate cross-cultural dialogue, such as the globalization of Western medical training and technology. This means that issues in medical ethics cross cultural boundaries in a way that others do not. We see that doctors in Thailand, for instance, display diversity in their attitudes and a 'schism in ethical styles' in terms of which while 'some hew closely to the secular, deontological model, others embrace a virtue ethics that liberally cites Buddhist principles and emphasizes the role of doctors' good character' (Grol-Prokopczyk, 2013:92).

Defining euthanasia

We should distinguish at the outset between euthanasia and suicide and note that conclusions reached about the ethics of suicide are not *ipso facto* applicable to euthanasia. There are medical, legal, and social issues surrounding euthanasia which have implications that an individual suicide does not. Chief among these is the fact that in euthanasia medical personnel licensed and often remunerated by the state act to terminate life with the state's approval. Society and the state are thus complicit in causing death in a way that is not the case in suicide (Somerville 2014, 210). The fact that suicide has been decriminalized in many jurisdictions, furthermore, does not mean that legislatures approve of suicide: it means only that criminalization is not seen as an appropriate means of addressing a complex social problem. The state still seeks to prevent suicide, which is why *assisting* suicide remains a crime in most jurisdictions.

As regards euthanasia, it is important to clarify how it will be understood. An essential ingredient in euthanasia is the intentional shortening of life, and since this is usually contemplated in a medical context euthanasia will be defined here as *the intentional killing of a patient by act or omission as part of his medical care*. The qualification *intentional* is of importance, as will become clear below.

As to the forms euthanasia can take, a distinction is often made in respect of its active and passive modes. *Active* euthanasia is the deliberate killing of a person by an act, for example by lethal injection. *Passive* euthanasia is the intentional causing of death by an omission, for example by not providing nutrition, hydration, medicine, or some other requisite for life. Contrary to

some opinions, it is hard to see a significant moral distinction between active and passive euthanasia given that they share the common aim of causing death, and for this reason our definition treats them as equivalent.

Active and passive euthanasia can each take three forms: 1) voluntary, 2) non-voluntary and 3) involuntary. *Voluntary* euthanasia involves a request by a legally competent patient that his life should be terminated. *Non-voluntary* euthanasia is the killing of a non-competent patient. *Involuntary* euthanasia is the intentional killing of a patient without her consent. Debates about euthanasia today centre on the issue of *voluntary active euthanasia*, which is when a doctor intentionally kills a patient at the patient's request.

The practice of 'physician-assisted suicide' (PAS) or 'medical assistance in dying (MAiD) (as when a doctor prescribes lethal drugs but does not administer them) falls on the borderline between suicide and euthanasia. For reasons of space, we will not discuss it explicitly here, other than to note that since Buddhism opposes both suicide and euthanasia there is little doubt that PAS is also contrary to Buddhist precepts.

Euthanasia and the withdrawal of treatment

Before discussing the ethics of voluntary active euthanasia, we must first clear up a question that causes much confusion, namely the distinction between *the withdrawal of medical treatment* leading to a patient's death, and passive euthanasia. The classic example is turning off a life-support machine. To make a proper evaluation of this act we first need to classify it morally. Is it an act of homicide, in other words an act ordered to the patient's death? Or is it a therapeutic act, in other words, an act ordered to the patient's physical and mental well-being (to whatever degree this is achievable) within the normal parameters of his medical care? We cannot reach a judgment on the matter simply by viewing the act 'from the outside.' Clearly, a doctor can perform the same act (such as administer an injection) with the intention either to kill or cure, yet these are acts of a very different nature morally speaking. We must therefore take into account the subjective dimension of the act, namely the doctor's intention (aim or purpose) in acting as she did.

This means we need to know something of the doctor's deliberations, or the steps in the chain of reasoning which culminated in turning off the machine. It may go something like this: the patient is suffering; death will end the patient's suffering; turning off the ventilator will cause the patient's death; therefore, I will turn off the ventilator. In this case there is clearly a homicidal intent: turning off the ventilator is the means to cause the patient's death which in turn is the means to relieve the patient's suffering. In this case there is euthanasia. The doctor's decision here finds its justification in an implicit value-judgment about the patient's life, namely that a life of such poor quality is no longer worth living and the patient would be 'better off dead'.

The doctor's chain of reasoning, however, may run along different lines, perhaps as follows: my obligation as a doctor is to restore the patient to health or mitigate his symptoms where possible; the treatment I am administering is doing neither and is simply prolonging the dying process; therefore, I will (after due consultation with colleagues and any family members) withdraw the futile treatment and free the patient from the burden of this invasive medical intervention. The doctor knows that a *consequence* of turning off the ventilator will be the patient's almost immediate death, but her reasoning does not involve a homicidal intent, and so does not constitute a case of euthanasia. Here, *pace* Yu (2007), no judgment is made about the value or otherwise of the patient's *life*, only about the efficacy or otherwise of the *treatment*.

Dramatic cases such as withdrawal of ventilation are best considered against the background of ordinary medical practice where it is commonplace to discontinue disproportionate treatments (that is, futile or excessively burdensome treatments) even when life is shortened as a consequence. There is little point, for example, in treating pneumonia by administering antibiotics to a geriatric patient who has suffered several strokes and may have co-morbidities such as kidney failure. No-one would reasonably regard death in such circumstances as a case of intentional killing, even though the patient's life was shortened as a direct result of the doctor's decision and the doctor fully expected this outcome. Nor is the use of analgesics or other medication which may have the side-effect of shortening life (in practice almost never the case) an example of euthanasia.

It brings clarity to the discussion and illuminates the salient moral features of the act if we classify as euthanasia only cases where a treatment is administered, withheld, or withdrawn with the *intention* of hastening the patient's death. The danger in conflating the withdrawal of treatment with passive euthanasia is that it makes it seem that euthanasia is already an accepted part of standard medical practice when it is not. If passive euthanasia *were* accepted as a legitimate treatment option, it would indeed be difficult to see what objection there could be to *active* euthanasia (Varelius 2015). Why force a patient to die a lingering death when a lethal injection will bring rapid closure?

This traditional Western view of matters seems to track the Buddhist emphasis on the role of intention as a key criterion of moral responsibility. In the absence of intention (*cetanā*) there is no good or bad karma (AN iii.415). Theravāda commentaries make very clear, as Rupert Gethin notes, that 'whether or not we do things intentionally and with full consciousness is a crucial determinant of responsibility in the Buddhist view of things' (2004, 170). Clearly, then, whether turning off a life-support machine breaks the first precept turns on the intention from which it is done and not, *pace* Kanjanaphitsarn, on whether one 'fully realized' what the *result* of the action would be (2013, 8). With the proviso that intentional killing is always

excluded, we might formulate the following criterion for use in Buddhist terminal care: if a treatment cannot produce an overall net improvement in a patient's condition and is simply prolonging the dying process, then it may be discontinued even when doing so hastens the patient's death. (It should be noted this will exclude patients in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) who although unconscious will not normally be *dying* or in receipt of artificial ventilation.)

Tibetan Buddhist views

The criterion just enunciated may be helpful when interpreting pronouncements from Tibetan Buddhist leaders which have sometimes been seen as offering support for euthanasia. The Dalai Lama, for example, has made a number of remarks on the subject including a much-quoted letter to *Asiaweek* in 1985 in which he said 'In the event a person is definitely going to die and he is either in great pain or has virtually become a vegetable, and prolonging his existence is only going to cause difficulties and suffering for others, the termination of his life may be permitted according to Mahayana Buddhist ethics'. Rather than condoning euthanasia, the Dalai Lama may simply be expressing concern about artificial prolongation of the dying process. Unfortunately, the criteria mentioned by his holiness are not as clear as they might be: for instance, being a 'vegetable' is a crude term to use in a medical context. If this means that the patient is 'brain dead' then no moral issue arises, since by the standards of modern medicine (although perhaps not those of Tibetan Buddhism) the patient is already a corpse. It seems likely, then, that the Dalai Lama has in mind a case where the patient is not yet clinically dead but where death is imminent and there is no possibility of recovery. While recognizing that the prognosis in individual cases will vary, there seems no reason why Buddhism should find a case of this kind morally problematic. The aim of medicine, whether Western or Buddhist, has never been the prolongation of life by reference to some chronological measure.

The same conclusions might be drawn with respect to similar remarks by other high lamas. As Peter Harvey reports, 'Kalu Rinpoche has said that a terminal patient who himself chooses to be taken off a life-support system is doing an act which is karmically neither bad nor good' (2000, 302). If the act is karmically neutral this is presumably because it does not involve an intention to kill, and without an intention to kill there cannot be euthanasia as we understand it. The same may be said of comments made by Sogyal Rinpoche, also reported by Harvey:

> Life-support measures or resuscitation can be a cause of disturbance, annoyance, and distraction at the critical moment of death . . . In general there is a danger that life-sustaining treatment that merely prolongs the dying process may only kindle unnecessary grasping, anger, and frustration in a dying person, especially if this was not his or her original wish. Relatives . . . should reflect that if there is

> no real hope of recovery, the quality of the final days or hours of their loved one's life may be more important than simply keeping the person alive. (Harvey 2000, 301)

Once again, the comments refer to the discontinuation of futile treatment to allow the patient to die a natural death. This is something which has taken place uncontroversially in hospitals for centuries, including in Tibet. Although the advent of modern technology has meant that the interval between treatments being withdrawn and death taking place has dramatically shortened, the principle remains the same. The difference between this and euthanasia in practice is that if the patient does not die when the treatment is withdrawn the doctor will not follow up by administering a lethal injection. If a diagnosis is made that there is no possibility of recovery (and doctors should always err on the side of caution), there is no point in continuing a treatment; and to discontinue a futile treatment (such as artificial ventilation) in such circumstances need be no more than the reluctant acceptance that the patient is beyond medical help. A systematic analysis of Tibetan Buddhist views on euthanasia has been provided by Tsomo (2006), which reveals no support for euthanasia on the part of Tibetan lamas.

Autonomy

Autonomy has assumed special importance in discussions of euthanasia in the West where it is seen as a corrective to paternalistic attitudes which have historically been prevalent in healthcare. Medical paternalism is often associated with 'dysthanasia,' (the opposite of 'euthanasia'), a form of overzealous therapy that aims to delay death as long as possible even when there is no hope of a cure. Respect for patient autonomy, by contrast, shifts the balance in favour of the patient and is the basis for the 'informed consent' which governs treatment decisions in the doctor-patient relationship. As such, it places the physician under a *prima facie* obligation to respect the autonomous choice of the patient and is considered by many supporters of euthanasia to be the primary moral ground of the 'right to die'.

The involvement of the doctor, however, means the issue cannot be framed exclusively in terms of patient autonomy. The doctor is not simply an instrument of the patient's will, and must herself make a judgment, as with any medical intervention, as to whether or not the treatment is medically and ethically appropriate before administering it. This means that the critical judgment is in practice taken out of the patient's hands, giving rise to what some see as a logical 'slippery slope' from voluntary to non-voluntary euthanasia. The argument here is that if the physician's judgment that the patient would be 'better off dead' is valid in a case of voluntary euthanasia, it is hard to see why it is not also valid in a case of non-voluntary euthanasia. If the patient has not expressed a view to the contrary or is incapable of doing so his autonomy would arguably not be infringed, and beneficence alone may be thought sufficient to justify ending his suffering.

Autonomy, furthermore, is not a central value for Buddhism, and placing importance on it may be thought to strengthen belief in an independent 'self' (*ātman*), the existence of which Buddhism denies. What is emphasized in Buddhism is not autonomy but relational interdependence (*paṭicca-samuppāda*). In terms of this teaching, individuals are not autonomous moral legislators or ethical atoms but nodes within a network of relationships in which each part is related to every other. As Chaicharoen and Ratanakul suggest, 'This concept affirms the interdependence of all beings . . . Suicide or assisted suicide as a "right to die" cannot be absolute because people do not live alone but are members of communities who might be injured by their death or by a social policy that encourages such death' (1998). This view is echoed by Stonington, who notes, 'Interdependence means that doctors, patients and relatives must think about the emotions and interests of all parties involved in a medical decision' (2006, 1681; Fan 2015; Akabayashi 2014). The Japanese, in particular, are skeptical about the role of autonomy in end-of-life decisions. Hamano observes 'Under certain circumstances the presence of choice may be an illusion' (2003, 17), and Hajime Nakamura comments, 'We do not forget that one's life has a social link and in broad meaning, a connection to universality. It is the condensation of inestimable lives' (quoted in Koike 2006, 31).

Compassion

A second value often thought to support euthanasia is compassion (*karuṇā*). Compassion is of great importance in Buddhism and is associated especially with the Mahāyāna ideal of the bodhisattva, someone who takes a vow to seek rebirth over countless eons until all beings have been freed from suffering. A person who expresses a wish to die should naturally be treated with compassion and understanding, but in such a situation it is often not clear what compassion requires. As Jens Schlieter points out 'Even though the Buddhist idea of "compassion" is intimately tied to the aim of alleviating suffering, it has traditionally not been defined by certain "therapeutic" obligations in a practical manner' (2014, 328).

Compassion is a sentiment rather than a moral principle, and like any sentiment must be expressed within ethical constraints. Thai bioethicist Pinit Ratanakul regards compassion as a '*prima-facie* duty' (along with veracity, noninjury to life, and justice) (1988, 301f). A duty to alleviate suffering, however, is not a duty to alleviate it at any price. As Chaicharoen and Ratankul observe, 'compassion is limited to giving drugs in sufficient quantities to relieve intense pain, as that experienced by cancer patients, as a last resort when no hope of recovery is possible and the patient is dying. This is the farthest that compassion can go. Beyond this point the precept against taking of life is violated' (1998). Ratanakul notes further how 'In some cases, compassion may mean permitting patients to meet the end naturally without futile prolongation of treatment . . . However, it is clear that Buddhism is against euthanasia—the quick, supposedly merciful ending of life to relieve pain' (2009).

A bodhisattva should aim to provide relief from suffering where possible, but the deeper obligation is to be a friend and companion on the long and arduous path through many lifetimes until a final end to suffering is found in nirvana. Euthanasia by itself cannot free beings from suffering, since according to the First Noble Truth suffering is inherent in existence. In cases where suffering is due to karma, moreover, killing will only postpone the suffering to a later date. This is an argument the Dalai Lama has used against both euthanasia and assisted suicide (Delhey 2006, 54). Obviously, this would not hold true for Buddhists who do not believe in rebirth, and such 'Buddhist modernists' might find the case for euthanasia more appealing. Even they, however, might believe that euthanasia expresses not a deeper solidarity with beings and a willingness to share their suffering but a severing of the relationship with the suffering patient.

Compassion can express itself in more constructive ways through the provision of hospice care so that people do not die, or fear they will die, in distressing circumstances (Florida and Ratanakul 2012; Chaicharoen and Ratankul 1998; Bruce 2012). As Ratanakul observes, 'The Buddhist objection to the experience of unbearable pain as the reason for euthanasia is justified. The hospice movement has shown that we already possess the means to control suffering and the knowledge to maintain people without severe pain' (2009). It is noteworthy that experts in palliative care who assist patients to die naturally with dignity are (along with disability rights groups) among the strongest opponents of euthanasia. The justification for euthanasia in the last analysis rests not on compassion but on the reasons why it is thought to be in the patient's best interests to be killed rather than go on living. Taking compassion as the premise, therefore, does not mean that euthanasia must be the conclusion.

Textual sources

The textual material most relevant to euthanasia is found in the section of the Buddhist canon known as the Monastic Rule (*Vinaya*). This is primarily a code of conduct for monks and nuns, but as Anālayo points out, 'The Buddhist monastic legislators did not operate from the perspective of a clear-cut divide between laity and monastics' (2014, 29). The decisions recorded in the *Vinaya* are based on moral and jurisprudential principles that transcend monastic law, and in conjunction with the associated commentaries allow us to state with precision what constitutes culpable killing both by those who are ordained and those who are not.

The circumstances that gave rise to the promulgation of the monastic precept against taking human life (the third *pārājika*), have a direct bearing on euthanasia (Vin iii.68ff). The sources narrate an incident (recorded in all extant versions of the *Vinaya*) in which some monks became disgusted with their bodies and proceeded to kill themselves or lend assistance to one

another in dying. Others engaged the services of a 'sham recluse' (*samaṇa-kuttaka)* who killed them in the belief he was helping them 'cross over' and attain nirvana (Heim 2013, 161-5; Analayo 2014). When the Buddha found out what had happened, he promulgated a precept against taking human life directly or providing anyone with a 'lethal instrument' (*satthahārakaṃ*) with which to commit suicide. After this, in a separate incident (Vin iii.71), a number of monks encouraged a sick layman to commit suicide. The Buddha then extended the precept to exclude persuading or lending encouragement to anyone to end their life, as follows:

> Should any monk intentionally deprive a human being of life or look for some lethal instrument (*satthahārakaṃ*) [to assist him], or speak favourably of death, or incite [anyone] to death saying 'My good man, what need have you of this evil, difficult life? Death would be better for you than life,' or who should deliberately and purposefully in various ways speak favourably of death or incite [anyone] to death: he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion. (Vin iii.72)

As Anālayo notes, the precept prohibits 'intentionally depriving a human being of life and assisting others in committing suicide, or inciting them to kill themselves' (2014, 25). Apart from euthanasia, this prohibition also applies to physician assisted suicide (PAS) which, as mentioned above, is when the physician assists the patient to die by providing, in the words of the precept, 'some lethal instrument'. The wording of the precept also anticipates the kind of emotional blackmail that many, and especially the vulnerable elderly, may experience at the hands of unsympathetic relatives or in uncaring medical institutions.

The *Vinaya* prohibition on intentional killing also includes the encouragement to die motivated by more benevolent sentiments, as the very next case reveals. According to the brief report: 'At that time a certain monk was ill. Out of compassion the other monks spoke favourably to him of death. The monk died' (Vin iii.79). The commentary expands on this terse account as follows:

> 'Out of compassion' means that those monks, seeing the great pain the monk was in from the illness felt compassion and said to him: 'You are a virtuous man and have performed good deeds, why should you be afraid of dying? Indeed, heaven is assured for a virtuous man at the very instant of death.' Thus, they made death their aim and . . . spoke in favour of death. That monk, as a result of them speaking favourably of death, ceased to take food and died prematurely. It was because of this they committed an offence. (VA ii.464)

Here we see that it is wrong 'to make death one's aim' even when motivated by the compassionate desire to ease suffering. A small selection of further cases confirming this principle can be mentioned in summary form. One (Vin iii.85) concerns a monk who at the request of relatives assists in bringing about the death of a double amputee by prescribing a drink which will be fatal for

him. The monk was expelled. A similar verdict was pronounced in the case of a nun who recommended a different concoction as a means of causing the death of another patient in the same condition (Vin iii.86). In a third case, to spare a condemned criminal the mental distress of awaiting the appointed time of execution, a monk interceded with the executioner to carry out the sentence immediately, and this was duly done. Despite the compassionate motivation, and the fact that the prisoner's death was inevitable, the monk was judged guilty and expelled (Vin iii.85). The circumstances in which end-of-life dilemmas arise were clearly no less varied in the Buddha's time than they are today.

The circumstances of the Buddha's own death are relevant in this connection. In his eightieth year he suffered a 'dire sickness' in which 'sharp pains came upon him, even to death', but by a strong effort of will he resolved to fight the illness and keep his hold on life until he had addressed his disciples and taken leave of the Order. As he told his personal attendant Ānanda: 'just as a worn-out cart, Ānanda, can be kept going only with the help of thongs, so, methinks, the body of the Tathāgata can only be kept going by bandaging it up' (Rhys Davids 1910, 108). Later he announced that he had 'relinquished his life-faculty' (*ayusaṅkhāraṃ ossaji*) and predicted that his death would occur three months hence. Although some interpret this as 'a kind of suicide' (Delhey 2006, 36; cf. Analayo 2014, 165ff), it may be better understood as signifying the Buddha's acceptance that death was at hand and that efforts to extend his life would merely be a prolongation of the dying process with its attendant pain and suffering (hence dysthenasia). On this basis, his death was no more suicide than that of the cancer patient who decides to forego another round of chemotherapy in order to enjoy a shorter but fuller life with her family in the time remaining.

Although the *Vinaya* cases discussed are ancient, the precedent they set for contemporary end-of-life care seems clear enough. The significance of these judgments is all the greater because they were handed down at a time when the benefits of modern medicine and palliative care were not available. The cases reveal that the reasons for seeking euthanasia have not changed greatly, and the cases cover the main grounds on which euthanasia is commonly thought justifiable today, namely autonomy, compassion, and quality of life. The judgments demonstrate that it is wrong to take life directly, wrong to provide the means for others to kill themselves, wrong to incite someone to kill another, and wrong to emphasize the positive aspects of death and the negative aspects of life. The unifying principle underlying these judgments appears to be that any intention to cause death as a means to end suffering is immoral.

Japan

Having reviewed the classical sources, we now consider empirical evidence from two parts of the Buddhist world. Euthanasia has not been legalized anywhere in Asia, although there is increasing debate on the issue in many countries. In Japan while there is no statutory regulation of end-of-life care, a series of court decisions from the mid-1990s onwards have provided judicial guidance (Kai 2009, 4ff). To further clarify the legal position, a document known as 'The Guideline on the Decision-Making-Process in Terminal Care' was issued in May 2007 by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Kai 2009, 10).

The Japanese Society for Death with Dignity (*songsenshi*)—formerly the Japan Euthanasia Society—has campaigned for the legalization of euthanasia since 1983 in a manner similar to Western organizations, although it is not clear to what extent it represents the views of Buddhists. The Buddhist perspective has been investigated by Kiyoyuki Koike who worked as a psychiatrist in Japan for forty years and has translated an extensive selection of Buddhist texts relating to suicide and euthanasia. He concludes a lengthy review of the evidence with the comment 'I think that most Japanese and a lot of Asian people are reluctant to accept the right to die in the depths of their minds' (2001/2, 189). In Koike's view there is little demand for euthanasia in Japan. 'Almost without exception,' he notes, 'family members and specialists care for patients with senile dementia, severe mental disorders and those in a vegetative state until their death. The lives of loved ones and patients are valued' (2006, 27). Other researchers have concluded that 'the Japanese society of modern times is more restrictive in its approach to the issue than many Western countries' (Hugaas, 2006).

Evidence on religious attitudes can be found in a 1998 survey of 338 Japanese religious groups carried out by Dr Noritoshi Tanida (2000). The survey, the first of its kind, included 157 Buddhist groups belonging to different Japanese sects. Tanida reports that 'Active euthanasia was greeted unfavorably among the religionists in general, as it was among secular people', with less than 20% of respondents indicating approval. The author also mentions 'Buddhism's tendency to deny futile treatments at the terminal setting,' noting that 'Shinto and Buddhist organizations advocated "being natural" when medical treatment becomes futile in a terminal setting' (2000, 339). An earlier national survey in 1991 revealed that only 16 per cent of Japanese thought life should be sustained as long as possible while 78 per cent thought palliative care desirable even though it might shorten life (Kimura 1996). A survey of the views of Japanese doctors has been carried out by Macer, Hosaka, et al (1996), and while moral issues cannot be settled by opinion polls the results seem consistent with what we have described as the normative Buddhist position, namely a rejection of euthanasia in favour of a 'natural death'.

Japan has a distinctive and perhaps unique history with respect to both suicide and infanticide (*mabiki*), and some have seen such practices as evidence of Buddhist toleration of euthanasia (Becker 1990; Perrett 1996). Becker approvingly compares the assisted suicide of the samurai warrior (*seppuku*) with euthanasia. The comparison between being 'cut down' by an enemy and 'cut down' by cancer, however, is strained, and the two situations are far from 'the same' (Becker 1990, 551) for several reasons. Cancer is not a moral agent; the samurai will not be killed by a physician; he is not suffering from an illness; he is not in physical pain; and he does not make a truly autonomous choice since he is strongly obligated to seek death by his martial code of honour.

It does not follow, moreover, that because Japanese samurai embraced Zen Buddhism their martial code of honour must be seen as an authentic expression of Buddhist ethical values, any more than the warmongering of Japanese Zen masters in World War II (Victoria, 1997, 2003) which we discussed in Chapter Four, shows that Buddhism tolerates fanatical nationalism and ruthless slaughter. The disgraced samurai's feeling that death is his only option since he can no longer play a useful role in society, however, may find an echo in the feelings of uselessness and isolation experienced by many who seek euthanasia. Even so, this does not mean that death is an appropriate or justifiable remedy for such ills. As Peter Harvey notes, 'The central Buddhist response is one of aiding a person to continue to make the best of his or her "precious human rebirth", even in very difficult circumstances', rather than prematurely ending his life (2000, 309).

Thailand

In Thailand, the topic of end-of-life care became a point of public controversy following the death of the renowned monk and teacher Buddhadasa in 1993 (Ratanakul 2000; Jackson 2003; Kanjanaphitsarn 2013, 2015). Following a stroke, he was rushed to Siriraj Hospital in Bangkok in a coma and spent just over a month in intensive care. Debate raged over whether the monk should have been allowed to die peacefully in his forest monastery, as he had specified in an advance directive, or whether efforts should have been made to prolong his life. Eventually, he was returned to his monastery by plane with respirator and feeding tubes in place, where he passed away less than an hour after arrival.

As Stonington notes, Buddhadasa's death 'spurred a critique of biomedicine,' and led to his student Phra Paisal developing training programmes based on the premise that 'Death instead must become an *experience* and a *process* that can be faced, studied, and understood' (2011, 120-1, original emphasis). Spurred by similar concerns, palliative care programmes began to take off (Wright 2010) inspired by the pioneering work of Dr Temsak Phungrassami who had trained in palliative care in Australia. In

July 2007 the work of various end-of-life organizations coalesced in a conference in Bangkok entitled 'Culture, Death and the End of Life' (Stonington 2011, 130f).

Despite the existence of a patients' 'bill of rights' (The Thai Medical Council 2000) authorizing patients to make decisions about their medical care, Thai physicians are reluctant to disconnect ventilators from terminal patients. While some physicians will allow a family member to remove breathing tubes, they will generally not do it themselves. Stonington and Ratanakul explain that Thai physicians 'have a complex array of reasons for declining to remove ventilator support, including their medical training, fear of litigation, and belief in the sanctity of life' (2006, 1680). A physician who performs such an action, it is thought, inevitably incurs spiritual demerit. There is also a common Thai belief that the last part of the body to die is the breath, and hence 'pulling out a patient's ventilator may feel like pulling out the patient's soul' (2006, 1680). Thai medical care focuses instead on encouraging the patient to let go of the mental attachments that are keeping him alive, hoping that when the patient is ready, he will simply let go and die with the respirator still attached.

There are further distinctive aspects to the Thai situation. Children often feel they owe their parents a 'debt of life' and placing a parent in intensive care is their way of 'giving life' (*hai chīwit*) and paying back the debt of flesh (*neua*), blood (*leuat*), and breath (*lom haijai*), the basic elements of biological existence that their parents endowed them with (Stonington 2012, 840). The respirator is seen as a crucial tool in 'paying down' (*chai nī*) the debt of breath. Stonington reports how 'One family was so adamantly aggressive with medical care for their father that he underwent three rounds of cardiopulmonary resuscitation despite his constant pleas to go home and die. Eventually, after being resuscitated several times, the family took the old man home' (2012, 840).

The reason why the family eventually took the patient home is of interest. While hospitalization and intensive care is seen as a way of 'paying back' a debt to a parent, a hospital is also regarded as an inauspicious place to die. Hospitals are seen as places of metaphysical pollution haunted by evil spirits and the ghosts of people who have died. For this reason, the ceremonies that need to be performed are not thought to have the same spiritual potency, and so the merit the dying person can achieve is much less. The home, by contrast, is a much more auspicious place to die. As Stonington notes, 'The home is sacred and familiar. It is safe and warm. It has a long history of purity because it has been blessed by monks in many ceremonies, and it has been the site of a lifetime of good deeds and devoted love' (2012, 843). Once the patient is back home, the act of withdrawing an endotracheal breathing tube becomes ethical. As a nurse stated, 'It is unethical to withdraw the tubes in the hospital, but it is ethical to withdraw them at home' (Stonington 2012, 836).

The rationale for this paradoxical judgment seems to be that once the debt of life has been paid in the hospital the patient can legitimately be assisted to die a good death by the removal of the respirator at home.

The reluctance to withdraw life-support in hospital, however, has led to an accumulation of patients who are being kept alive by machines. Stonington describes one ward where 'half the patients were on mechanical ventilators. The air was sterile and filled with the beeps of machines. Nurses scuffled around with gloves, wheeling blood-pressure check units to the beds of almost corpse-like patients, strapped as modern cyborgs into the life-machines of medical innovation' (2012:841). In view of the strain it places on resources, this is not a sustainable position. As Stonington and Ratanakul note, 'there is an urgent need for solutions to the "ventilator problem,"—both to patch the failing universal healthcare system and to help Thais make difficult decisions about intervention at the end-of-life' (2006, 1681).

Cost is a reason offered by one Thai philosopher (Somparn Promta) for supporting euthanasia for disabled infants and incurable patients on life-support (Kanjanaphitsarn 2013, 5). As Chaicharoen and Ratanakul note, however, 'It is clear that active euthanasia including assisted suicide is against the Buddhist teaching' (1998). They add that 'Thai lay Buddhists also are unwilling to see general policies adopted accepting passive euthanasia. As there are always risks and uncertainties, they would favor risking in favor of life and not against it' (1998). In spite of this, they note public confusion in the face of cases such as that of 'a 94-year-old woman, kept alive by artificial means for over a year' and 'an 11-year-old girl in irreversible coma for years'. They report how when lay Buddhists were asked which factors should be important in end-of-life decision-making 'none could give a definite Buddhist answer. Some say yes and some no, but they could not find grounds in Buddhism to support their answers' (1998).

Conclusion

Perhaps the preceding discussion will indicate the direction in which an answer to the Thai 'ventilator problem' might lie. To recap, it was suggested Buddhism rejects euthanasia but without imposing an obligation to preserve life at all costs. As Tibetan nun Karma Lekshe Tsomo sums up, 'From my examination of the debate and the responses of the Buddhist traditions on two core issues of the debate, I conclude that intractable pain does not justify euthanasia and that the principle to protect and nurture life does not necessitate extraordinary medical procedures' (2006, 174).

Much support for euthanasia arises from anxieties about the inappropriate use of medical science. There is understandable concern about patients being kept alive as 'prisoners of technology' when many feel the appropriate decision is to allow nature to take its course. The normative position identified

here does not force dying patients to endure a living death hooked up to life support machines, nor does it oblige doctors to subject terminal patients to piecemeal medical procedures when what they yearn for is a peaceful and dignified death in the company of their loved ones. Neither doctor nor patient is under any obligation to prolong life purely as an end in itself.

For Buddhists, death is not a final end but the doorway to rebirth and new life. As Chaicharoen and Ratanakul report 'More and more elderly Buddhists, monks and lay people alike, express their wishes to be allowed to die in the last stage of their lives accepting death as a natural end simply because, they believe, this is the Buddhist way of facing the inevitable death' (1998). The Buddha was fully aware of the problem of human suffering, and through both his words and example encouraged his followers to care for the sick and dying (De Silva, 1994). As the record shows, however, he rejected euthanasia as an option in medical treatment. Buddhist physicians have followed his example for well over two thousand years and there is little evidence that Buddhists today see any compelling reason why this should change.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- Euthanasia may be defined as *the intentional killing of a patient by act or omission as part of his medical care*. *Active* euthanasia is the deliberate killing of a patient by an act, as for example, by lethal injection. *Passive* euthanasia is the intentional causing of death by an omission, as for example, by not providing some requisite for life. Physician Assisted Suicide (PAS) is where a physician prescribes a lethal drug but does not administer it to the patient.
- Three modes of euthanasia are commonly identified: voluntary, non-voluntary, and involuntary. Voluntary euthanasia is when a competent patient requests assistance in ending his life. This is the classic case around which there is contemporary debate. Voluntary euthanasia has been legalised in jurisdictions like the Netherlands and Belgium.
- Confusion arises from a failure to define euthanasia correctly. For euthanasia, there must always be a clearly formed *intention* to kill, not simply *foresight* that death will occur. The *motive* for euthanasia is usually compassion, and patient autonomy is commonly invoked as a justifying *principle*.
- Case histories in the *Vinaya* show that it is wrong to kill patients or assist someone to end his life even when motivated by the compassionate desire to ease suffering.
- Cultural values can influence attitudes to euthanasia. In the West, the issue is seen as largely one of individual rights, whereas in Asia the family and social context is more important, as is respect for the elderly.
- Euthanasia has not been legalized in any Asian country and there is little support for it in the two countries reviewed, namely Japan and Thailand.

Discussion questions

1. Is there a moral difference between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ euthanasia?
2. Is the withdrawal of medical treatment that leads to a patient’s death the same as euthanasia?
3. Construct an argument for the legalization of euthanasia.
4. Do ancient texts like the *Vinaya* have any relevance to the modern world?
5. Why do you think euthanasia is less controversial in Asia than in the West?

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Chapter Twelve
Science and Transhumanism

In this chapter

Buddhists often claim their teachings are based on reason and are in harmony with science. However, the science of genetics and technologies like cloning and cryogenics suggest that the Buddhist doctrines of karma and rebirth are in conflict with science. Buddhist modernists accordingly reject these beliefs. The movement known as Transhumanism (or 'Posthumanism') goes further, suggesting that a combination of technologies may offer a shortcut to the end of suffering potentially replacing Buddhism altogether. Some Transhumanists envisage a merger between man and machine known as the 'Singularity,' a development that will lead to the creation of wholly 'digital persons' and provide a technological alternative to nirvana. Sceptics remain unconvinced that science and technology can provide solutions to what are fundamentally spiritual problems. We begin with an overview of the relationship between Buddhism and science before considering specific points of convergence and disagreement.

Introduction

Since the European Enlightenment an influential narrative has developed that depicts religion and science as rivals. As early as 1795, the French philosopher and mathematician Marquis de Condorcet (1743–1794) attacked Christianity in the following terms:

> Contempt for human sciences was one of the first features of Christianity. It had to avenge itself of the outrages of philosophy; it feared that spirit of investigation and doubt, that confidence of man in his own reason, the pest alike of all religious creeds. The fight of the natural sciences was even odious to it, and was regarded with a suspicious eye, as being a dangerous enemy to the success of miracles: and there is no religion that does not oblige its sectaries to swallow some physical absurdities. (1795)

Buddhism by and large has escaped this critique and is often singled out as the most 'science friendly' of the world religions. An early proponent of this view, and a stern critic of Christianity, was Anagārika Dharmapāla (1864-1933). At a lecture delivered in New York in 1925 he neatly summed up the reasons for Buddhism's affinity with science:

> The Message of the Buddha that I have to bring to you is free from theology, priestcraft, rituals, ceremonies, dogmas, heavens, hells and other theological shibboleths. The Buddha taught to the civilized Aryans of India 25 centuries ago a scientific religion containing the

> highest individualistic altruistic ethics, a philosophy of life built on psychological mysticism and a cosmogony which is in harmony with geology, astronomy, radioactivity and relativity. No creator god can create an ever-changing, ever-existing cosmos. Countless billions of aeons ago the earth was existing but undergoing change, and there are billions of solar systems that had existed and exist and shall exist. (Quoted in Lopez 2009, 15)

As Donald Lopez points out, claims of this kind often specifically target Christianity, arguing that Buddhism by contrast 'is not superstition but science'. Lopez notes the historical persistence of such claims and indeed characterises his book *Buddhism & Science. A Guide for the Perplexed* as 'a study of that persistence' (2009, xi). He notes 'for more than 150 years, the claims for the compatibility of Buddhism and Science have remained remarkably similar, both in their content and their rhetorical form' (2009, xii). We do not need to review the history of this discourse here, and our concern will be more with the future than the past. We can observe at least that the central tropes of the discourse are alive and well. Biologist David Barash, for example, the author of *Buddhist Biology: Ancient Eastern Wisdom Meets Modern Western Science*, writes in *Scientific American*:

> My decades as a biologist, along with comparable decades as a Buddhist sympathizer, have convinced me that of all the world's religions—and especially by contrast to the Abrahamic Big Three (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), Buddhism is unusually science-friendly. (2014)

Barash speaks of 'the comfortable fit between Buddhism and science' facilitated by texts like the *Kālāma Sutta* which is 'seen as supporting free inquiry and an absence of rigid dogma, an attitude entirely open to empirical verification and thus, consistent with science.' On this basis, 'it seems reasonable and appropriate that Buddhism be viewed in the West as comparatively free of irrationality, superstitious belief, and stultifying tradition' (2014).

Apart from its empirical methodology, another important similarity with science to which attention is often drawn is the doctrine of interconnectedness (*paṭicca-sammuppāda*). This doctrine is often cited because, as Lopez notes, it seems 'utterly modern, and scientific, explaining both the outer world of matter and the inner world of mind without recourse to God' (2009, 21). From the late 1960s parallels between this doctrine and modern physics were explored in books like the best-selling *The Tao of Physics* (1975) by physicist Fritjof Capra. The view of interdependency expounded in Buddhist texts like the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* with its image of Indra's cosmic net seems to anticipate the latest thinking in both theoretical physics and modern ecology. 'The fundamental Buddhist teaching of interconnectedness,' Barash notes, 'could as well have come from a "master" of physiological ecology' (2014).

However, the same writer points out that these favourable parallels with science come with a caveat:

> Buddhism involves daily ritual devotions, belief in amulets and other special charms, and even the presupposition that the man, Siddhartha Gautama, was a divine being. There are, I regret to note, Buddhist traditions that insist on retaining an array of nonsensical hocus-pocus and abracadabra altogether at odds with any scientific tradition worthy of the name. Among these, the notion of 'rebirth' is especially ridiculous, insofar as it implies that after their death, people will eventually reappear in some other form, with their personalities or at least certain 'karmic attributes' intact. (Barash 2014)

Apparently, then, Buddhism does well when compared to other religions but still falls short when compared with science. Evidently, it must try harder to purge itself of the 'nonsensical hocus-pocus and abracadabra' believed in by millions of its followers. This dismissive attitude is not uncommon on the part of scientists who, while contemptuous of religion, often hold a naïve view of science as the arbiter of truth in all domains. Nevertheless, this view has considerable influence and has persuaded many that traditional Buddhism stands in need of reform. The result has been the rise of the movement known as 'Buddhist modernism' mentioned in Chapter Two, and about which more will be said below.

Buddhist modernism

Buddhist modernists are united by the belief that the older Asian form of Buddhism has failed and there is a need to create a new Buddhism for the West. This will be, as Segall describes it, 'in better accord with Western secular and scientific trends' (2020, 5). Segall, a retired American clinical psychologist, long-time Buddhist practitioner and Zen priest, speaks of a 'tension' arising from cultural differences that present a challenge to the Western appropriation of Buddhism in its traditional form. He observes:

> The modern Western ecosystem of meanings presents several significant barriers to the unmodified assimilation of traditional Buddhist teachings. Chief among these are Western beliefs concerning life after death, Western scientific naturalism and materialism, and the Aristotelian ideal of human flourishing—Westerners' implicit understanding of what it means to live the best possible kind of life a human being can aspire to. (2020, 6)

'Buddhist modernism' is an umbrella term that includes a range of positions adopted by contemporary Buddhist groups which go by names like 'neo-Buddhism,' 'naturalized Buddhism,' and 'Secular Buddhism,' and encompass a range of overlapping views and beliefs. David McMahan describes these modernized forms of Buddhism as a 're-articulation' of Buddhism 'in the language of science and secular thought' (quoted in Segall 2020, 5). What unites these groups is a desire to reconstruct traditional teachings so as to place a stronger emphasis on rationality, secularism, compatibility

with modern science, individualism, and the exploitation of psychological techniques of self-enhancement and mental health (like meditation and mindfulness).

A consequence of this new orientation is that metaphysical beliefs are downplayed. Modernists reject ancient cosmologies, belief in gods and spirits, and the notion of rebirth. Karma is a principal casualty in this revisioning of Buddhist teachings. The website of the Secular Buddhist Association, for example, has this to say on the topic of 'Rebirth and the Supernatural':

> Secular Buddhists have a variety of ways of approaching teachings or text where they see mention of past lives, future lives, or rebirth in general. Some just ignore the passages and move on. Some of us choose to look at the topic as a metaphor for the many ways the feeling of self and ego arise, the rebirth of greed, hatred, etc. And some feel that either these passages about literal rebirth were added to the Pali canon at a later time, or that the writers misunderstood or mistranslated the teachings, or that Buddha was victim to the times he was born in, or that he put a lot of weight in meditation experience. Some even feel rebirth is contradictory to the teachings. The point is, you don't have to believe in literal rebirth to benefit from these amazing teachings.

In accordance with the above, the problem of suffering is reinterpreted as applying specifically to suffering in this life, and a sceptical or agnostic position is adopted concerning other realms and past and future lives. Some modernists also favour Western theories of ethics since these do not involve metaphysical presuppositions that are incompatible with natural science (Segall 2020). Those ethical teachings that can be divorced from karma, however, are retained and in many respects the break with tradition is less marked. Thus, modernists continue to respect the Five Precepts and to practice traditional virtues like non-harming (*ahiṃsā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*).

Stephen Batchelor is a leading exponent of Buddhist modernism and member of the advisory board of the Secular Buddhist Association. He was formerly a monk in the Zen and Tibetan traditions. His books, such as *Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening* (1998) and *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2011), give a good introduction to Buddhist modernism and explain why, in his view, a new secularised form of Buddhism—which he calls 'Buddhism 2.0'—is required for modern times. For a general review of his and similar positions *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* by David McMahan (2008) is recommended.

While Buddhism 2.0 clearly has appeal, we may wonder what is to be the fate of Buddhism 1.0. Expressing scepticism about the coexistence of Buddhism and science, Lopez writes: 'It is my claim that to see Buddhism as ever modern comes at a cost, a price that many may consider well worth paying. But before paying that price, it is perhaps useful to recall

those elements of Buddhism that are so starkly premodern, and to ask what is at stake in their loss' (2009, 216). The elements at risk of loss are described in the following series of rhetorical questions Lopez addresses to the modernists:

> Where are the deities who animate the landscape and the divine protectors whom the Dalai Lama consults when making a momentous decision? . . . Where is the uncompromising assertion that this world is built by ignorance, a world that ultimately is not to be improved, but from which one must seek to escape, along with all other beings, with the urgency that a person whose hair is ablaze seeks to douse the flames? Where is the insistence that meditation is not intended to induce relaxation but rather a vital transformation of one's vision of reality? Is this Buddhism placed at risk by the compulsion to find convergences with Science? (2009, 152)

Cloning and genetics

Having characterised some general features of the relationship between Buddhism and science we turn in the remainder of the chapter to a consideration of the challenges to Buddhist teachings posed by science and technology. One scientific development that has done much to challenge traditional beliefs is cloning. (Cloning was mentioned earlier in Chapter Seven in connection with the provision of donor animals for xenotransplantation.) The birth of Dolly the sheep, the first mammalian clone, caused a furore when it was announced to the world on 24 February 1997. Cloning met with widespread condemnation from the theistic traditions. These religions teach that life is a gift from God, and for them the creation of life in the laboratory seems to usurp the authority of the creator. Reproductive cloning is also in conflict with the biblical model of sexual generation mentioned in Chapter Nine, and in the eyes of many believers threatens to undermine divinely sanctioned norms governing family and social life.

Many of these theological objections disappear when cloning is viewed from a Buddhist perspective, a fact that for many confirms Buddhism's compatibility with science. Since Buddhism does not believe in a supreme being, there is no divine creator who might be offended by human attempts to duplicate his work. Nor does Buddhism believe in a personal soul or teach that human beings are made in God's image. Its view of creation and cosmology is very different from that of the Bible and does not entail normative principles about human reproduction. There is no theological reason, then, why cloning could not be seen as another way of creating life, neither intrinsically better nor worse than any other. Such is the opinion of Professor Yong Moon, a member of a cloning team at Seoul National University who stated, 'Cloning is a different way of thinking about the recycling of life—it's a Buddhist way of thinking' (2004).

Despite attempts to align Buddhism with science, cloning presents certain conundrums for Buddhist doctrine. Donald Lopez frames these in the following terms:

> According to the law of karma, experiences are the result of past deeds. Would a cloned sentient being carry the same karma as the original sentient being? Would they have identical experiences? If so, two sheep, the original and the clone, should feel frisky or sleepy at the same time, should get hungry at the same time, should get shorn at the same time, should give birth to identical lambs at the same time, should go to the slaughter at the same time. But the clone had to grow from a lamb in order to become identical in form to her original. Does this mean that there would be a time lag in these experiences? One might also speculate about what the first sheep did in a past life that resulted in its being cloned. Was it a good deed or a bad deed? Perhaps these are the kinds of questions that the Buddha said 'tend not to edification.' (2009, 150)

Whether or not these questions tend to edification, they merit a response. Two main questions are raised above. The first is whether a clone inherits not just the physical characteristics but also the karma of the cloned subject. To answer this, we can consider the case of identical (or 'monozygotic') twins. These twins have identical DNA like a clone (which is in effect what they are), but there is no reason to think they share identical karma. In fact, Buddhaghosa informs us that twins differ in subtle physical ways as well as in their mannerisms, differences he explains as due precisely to their individual karma (Vsm 575). And if identical twins do not share the same karma there seems no reason to suppose that a clone will share the karma of its DNA donor. It seems axiomatic in Buddhist teachings that no two individuals can share the same karma (in effect, this would mean they were the same person).

As regards the second question, as to what the sheep did in a previous life to result in its being cloned in this one, two points can be made. The first is that the question presupposes a deterministic understanding of karma. Karma, however, is not deterministic, so there is no reason to assume that being cloned has a karmic cause. The second is to endorse Lopez's view that Buddhism regards speculation about past causes as unprofitable: even assuming there is some karmic cause, what matters is not what we did in the past but what we do now.

A more troubling problem is that karma and genetics provide competing explanations for certain physical and mental characteristics. The Buddha explained differences in lifespan (*āyus*), illness (*ābādha*), physical appearance (*varṇa*), and intellectual ability (*prajñā*) among beings as being due to their personal karma (MN iii.202f.). However, genetics now informs us that these characteristics are to a considerable extent influenced by genes. It also tells us that the individual human genome is entirely determined by parental DNA.

It is difficult, then, so see what role karma could play. If the characteristics the Buddha attributed to karma are in fact determined by DNA, the concept of karma seems to be redundant.

Early assumptions that DNA is strongly deterministic, however, appear incorrect, and the emerging field of epigenetics suggests that there is considerable indeterminacy in the way genes are expressed. This is one reason the rapid medical progress expected following the sequencing of the human genome in 2000 has not so far occurred. It seems that no single gene is strongly predictive, and genetic switches called 'enhancers' play a role in activating and deactivating genes in a way that is not so far well understood.

Factors like environment and behaviour can also influence the way genes are activated, if they are activated at all. Thus, while members of the same family may have a genetic disposition for diabetes or asthma, only one may develop the condition due to lifestyle factors (e.g., by smoking or consuming excess sugar). Similarly, a person may be born with a genetic disposition for intelligence, but if this capacity is not nurtured by a sound moral education, it is unlikely to bear fruit as wisdom. Since past karma is held to influence choices made in the present lifetime, including choices about such things as diet and lifestyle, we can see how karma could play a role in shaping mental and physical development. As already suggested, furthermore, karma does not exclude the role of accidents. The fate of a given individual is then perhaps best understood as not determined exclusively by DNA but by a combination of genetic disposition, lifestyle choices, environment, and random events, all interacting in complex ways.

The challenge to Buddhist doctrine, however, extends beyond genetics. Apart from physical characteristics and psychological dispositions, the sources state that karma determines things such as the socio-economic status of the family into which a child is born. This was traditionally explained, as we saw in Chapter Ten, by the notion of the consciousness of a deceased person (*gandhabba*) being drawn to rebirth in a particular womb. Clearly, sexual intercourse does not happen in the case of cloning or where fertilization occurs outside the bedroom, as with in-vitro fertilization (IVF). A more convincing explanation of the mechanism of rebirth, therefore, seems called for.

Apart from problems with karma and rebirth, cloning raises other puzzling questions, such as whether it is possible to clone a Buddha. Assuming that the Buddha had human DNA, there seems no reason why he could not be cloned, perhaps using DNA from a relic. The result would be a genetic duplicate similar to the kind seen in the case of identical twins. The interesting question, however, is whether the resemblance would be purely a physical one or whether the clone would also be an enlightened being. The answer to this question depends on the view we take of the role of DNA in bringing about enlightenment.

Buddhas are thought to have a deep insight into the nature of things, and it seems unlikely such an epistemic state could be encoded in the structure of DNA. While DNA may influence intelligence, there is more to awakening than cognitive ability. Buddhas also feel compassion for sentient beings and display 'emotional intelligence'. We are also told that the Buddha's enlightenment was the result of lifetimes of spiritual practice, which the possession of a 'Buddha gene' would have rendered unnecessary. This makes it difficult to see how there could be a genetic marker for enlightenment. It also follows that if enlightenment depended on a genetic trait, those who lacked the appropriate DNA would be excluded from the goal of Buddhahood. There is nothing in mainstream Buddhism, however, to suggest that anyone is congenitally excluded from this goal. On the contrary, all are believed to possess 'Buddha nature', or the capacity to achieve awakening.

Cryonics

Further puzzles for Buddhist doctrine are posed by the science of cryonics. On its website, the Alcor Life Extension Foundation of Arizona defines cryonics as 'the science of using ultra-cold temperature to preserve human life with the intent of restoring good health when technology becomes available to do so'. Cryopreservation is an experimental technique which aims at freezing and later resuscitating people who have died. Either the head or the whole body can be frozen. Today, embryos are routinely frozen and resuscitated, suggesting that life can be sustained in suspended animation over long periods of time. However, it has not so far proved possible to cryopreserve human organs for transplantation.

In the case of the brain, some researchers believe that cryonics need not resuscitate the organ itself, but simply preserve the information it contains for later download. In terms of this theory, personality, memory, and skills are encoded in the pattern or connection between neurons rather than physically embedded in the organ. In 2018 scientists working at cryobiology company 21st Century Medicine successfully froze and rewarmed a complete pig's brain with its connectome (the wiring diagram of the brain's neural connections) still intact. This meant that the information stored in the brain's 150 trillion connections could—if the theory is sound—be recovered and uploaded into a new physical or virtual body. There are currently almost 300 cryonically frozen individuals in the USA, some fifty in Russia, and several thousand more signed up for the procedure, including Google's Director of Engineering, Ray Kurzweil.

Once again, we might wonder whether this new technology undermines the Buddhist belief in rebirth. Buddhism teaches that rebirth occurs soon after death (either instantaneously or at the latest 49 days after death), and if a person's consciousness had already left the body, it would seem impossible for the resuscitation of a frozen brain or body to take place because the

departed person would presumably have already been reborn elsewhere. Much, of course, turns on what one understands by 'death', and perhaps someone declared dead on today's criteria might be easily resuscitated in the future. If a patient were to be cryogenically preserved before any deterioration in the brain had occurred (perhaps the patient could opt for euthanasia to improve the chance of success), there would seem to be a reasonable prospect of resuscitation at a future date. If a cryogenically frozen patient was successfully restored to life centuries later, we might say that from a Buddhist perspective the patient never really passed away. What happened was that he or she was simply frozen and placed on long-term life-support, and since no one died, no one was reborn. The patient who was resuscitated, then, was the same as the one who 'died'.

Cryonics is one method of postponing death, but there are others. The California Life Company was set up by the founders of Google in 2013 to find ways to combat ageing and its effects, and the annual RAAD conference (Revolution Against Aging and Death) showcases the latest techniques for life extension. These include age-suppressing pro-biotics, parabiosis (infusing the body with younger blood cells), and drugs and other agents to protect telomeres (the part of a cell that affects ageing). There seems no fundamental Buddhist objection to living longer, and the prolongation of life is a basic aim of Buddhist medicine. One obvious benefit of a longer life is that those committed to following the bodhisattva path can do more good than if their lives were cut short.

Buddhist mythology, moreover, envisages the human lifespan as elastic, as lengthening or shortening in step with cosmic cycles. The lifespan of the gods is many times greater than that of human beings, although a vastly extended lifespan is not necessarily a greater good from a soteriological perspective. This is because life as a human being provides a 'reality check' in bringing one face to face with the painful realities of birth, old age, sickness, and death and it may be that it is the very experience of impermanence that makes enlightenment possible. Death, perhaps, is the grit in the oyster that produces the pearl of wisdom and gives life its meaning. As the philosopher Bertrand Russell expressed it, 'If I lived forever the joys of life would inevitably in the end lose their savor. As it is, they remain perennially fresh' (2015, 17).

Transhumanism

The dream that death will eventually be overcome by science has been around since the Enlightenment. Marquis de Condorcet, whom we mentioned at the start of the chapter, wrote the following:

> Would it even be absurd to suppose this quality of melioration in the human species as susceptible of an indefinite advancement; to suppose that a period must one day arrive when death will be nothing more than the effect either of extraordinary accidents, or

> of the slow and gradual decay of the vital powers; and that the . . . interval between the birth of man and this decay, will itself have no assignable limit? (1795, 368)

A fellow Enlightenment thinker who believed in the power of science to perfect human nature was William Godwin (1756-1836). Godwin spoke of a presumption 'that the term of human life may be prolonged, and that by the immediate operation of intellect, beyond any limits which we are able to assign.' As an anarchist and revolutionary he looked forward to a future in which 'There will be no war, no crimes, no administration of justice, as it is called, and no government. Beside this, there will be neither disease, anguish, melancholy, nor resentment. Every man will seek, with ineffable ardour, the good of all. Mind will be active and eager, yet never disappointed' (1793 Ch.9, Appendix). A more chilling meditation on the dangers of scientific progress was provided by Godwin's daughter, Mary Shelley, who published her dystopian novel *Frankenstein* in 1818. Her vision of the influence of science on the well-being of humanity was less optimistic.

More than two centuries later, the Enlightenment dream of the moral improvement of has not come to pass. Nevertheless, the dream lives on, and many believe that it is closer to fruition than ever as developments in genetics, neuroscience, and artificial intelligence revolutionize the way we think about ourselves. Vast funds are being invested in anti-aging research by biotechnology companies like Altos Labs, which describes itself on its website (altoslabs.com) as 'focused on cellular rejuvenation programming . . . with the goal of reversing disease to transform medicine.' The firm is backed by three billion dollars of investment from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Russian venture capitalist Yuri Milner. Inspired by developments of this kind, 'Transhumanists' (or 'Posthumanists') see humanity as poised on the cusp of an evolutionary quantum leap that will overcome many present limitations: cells will be regenerated, bodies will be enhanced with bionic limbs, and brains boosted by cybernetic implants and nanobots that increase intelligence and cognitive skills.

One influential proponent of the movement defines 'Transhumanism' as follows:

> Transhumanism is a class of philosophies of life that seek the continuation and acceleration of the evolution of intelligent life beyond its currently human form and human limitations by means of science and technology, guided by life-promoting principles and values. (Max More, 1990)

A Transhumanist manifesto called the *Transhumanist Declaration* was drafted in 1998 by twenty-three Transhumanist thinkers, and serves as the platform for Humanity Plus, an organization that promotes Transhumanist ideals. The declaration speaks in article one of 'the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary

suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth'. The means to achieve this include 'techniques . . . to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies' (article eight).

Several articles of the *Declaration* make reference to ethical values. Article seven, for instance, states, 'Policy making ought to be guided by responsible and inclusive moral vision, taking seriously both opportunities and risks, respecting autonomy and individual rights, and showing solidarity with and concern for the interests and dignity of all people around the globe.' It adds, 'We must also consider our moral responsibilities towards generations that will exist in the future.' In the same vein, article eight affirms, 'We advocate the well-being of all sentience, including humans, non-human animals, and any future artificial intellects, modified life forms, or other intelligences to which technological and scientific advance may give rise.' Phrases like 'the well-being of all sentience' have a Buddhist ring to them, and the goal of transhumanism is the noble one of overcoming pain, suffering, sickness, and death, the very obstacles to happiness that are mentioned in the First Noble Truth. Echoing the aim of Buddhism's four noble truths Ray Kurzweil writes, 'I view disease and death at any age as a calamity, as problems to be overcome' (2008, 185).

To many, biological immortality seems a realistic and desirable goal. Perhaps all bodies, whether carbon or silicon based, are best thought of simply as platforms for rebirth or 'sleeves' into which consciousness can be downloaded. If so, the consciousness of a deceased person could one day take rebirth in an artificial body providing a greatly enhanced lifespan. Up to now, such bodies have not been available, but developments in cybernetics might change that. Some Tibetan lamas, including the Dalai Lama, seem to think that a spiritually advanced person might consciously choose to take rebirth in a silicon-based body instead of a carbon-based human one.

Some transhumanists, however, have a more ambitious aim and see the ultimate goal as an altogether new mode of existence, namely as a disembodied 'digital person' residing in a virtual reality hosted by a (hopefully benevolent) AI. To encourage the development of AI along ethical lines a team of concerned experts and entrepreneurs launched OpenAI in 2015. With a billion dollars of initial funding the organization hopes to promote dialogue among stakeholders and avoid the accidental creation of a malicious superintelligence that could ultimately destroy the human race. The associated challenge of teaching a machine to act ethically while avoiding the inevitable human prejudice and bias of its programmers is a task that will clearly require careful thought (Wallach and Allen 2010; Hughes 2012).

The advent of the 'digital person' will come about, some believe, through a merger between the fields of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics, culminating in the 'Singularity,' or the point at which human and machine consciousness merge to bring into being a new hybrid form of life known as a 'cyborg'. These super-intelligent and long-lived beings, it is believed, will enjoy happiness and fulfilment impossible for ordinary mortals. This possibility clearly raises complex social and ethical questions for Buddhism that have so far been little explored (Himma et al. 2008; Duckworth 2020; Hershock 2021).

Neurodharma

As noted, given their common objective of reducing suffering, the aims of Buddhism and Transhumanism appear to converge. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of neuroscience. The Dalai Lama proudly describes himself as 'half Buddhist monk, half scientist', and Buddhist meditators have for some time been working with neuroscientists in a partnership of 'lama and lab' to understand the phenomenon of neuroplasticity—the brain's capacity to change itself. With the assistance of advanced practitioners, Western scientists have made significant progress toward understanding how meditative techniques work.

Based on these discoveries, some now suggest that traditional meditative practices can be integrated with emerging neurotechnologies to enhance self-control, compassion, and insight. A number of apps and devices are being developed to help the practitioner 'hack the brain' and experience the benefits of meditation without spending painful hours in the lotus posture. At present these devices are crude, but with further development it may be possible to induce higher states of trance (*jhāna*) or flashes of insight (*satori*). And further down the line why not enlightenment itself?

Buddhist Transhumanists like James Hughes and Michael La Torra believe that emerging technologies can help build an environment that maximizes capacity for spiritual growth. Hughes is co-founder of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies and a participant in the Institute's 'Cyborg Buddha' project. He believes spiritual growth can be enhanced through neurotechnology, the use of stimulants, designer 'smart' drugs, and other psychoactive substances that enhance intelligence: just as psychiatric medications can help people with depression lead a normal life, so tweaking brain chemistry, it is suggested, could heighten the perception of ordinary people providing a 'technoboost' that allowed them to see the world in a more enlightened way. While the effect of such enhancement may not be permanent, it could be potentially life changing.

Hughes believes that moral enhancement by means of 'virtue engineering' may also be possible through technological means. For example, if compassion is influenced by inherited genetic disposition, and activated through neurochemistry, it might be possible through a combination of

genetic engineering and neurotechnology to strengthen the tendency to experience and exhibit compassion consistently. Critics, however, point out that artificially manufactured compassion is no more genuine compassion than the manufactured happiness induced by recreational drugs is genuine happiness. Genuine moral sentiments and sound moral judgement, they point out, depend on a balance of emotional, motivational, and cognitive factors, and the bio-enhancement of only one of these may lead to a distorted moral conscience. While most of the discussion around moral enhancement has focused so far on boosting empathy, Hughes agrees that a mature moral character requires the combining of multiple virtues such as self-control, compassion, and wisdom. He believes certain of these virtues can be enhanced with electronic, pharmaceutical, and genetic technologies. Conscientiousness and self-discipline, for example, seem to be linked to the dopamine receptor; the hormone oxytocin induces feelings of trust and bonding; and anger and aggression appear to be affected by the monoamine oxidase A gene (MAOA).

Concerns

Not all Buddhists are convinced about the ethics of artificial enhancement, pointing out, for instance, that the fifth precept prohibits the use of intoxicants. Buddhism does not, however, prohibit the use of medicine, and a relevant distinction seems to be whether one consumes substances to get well or to 'get high'. The fifth precept seems to present no obstacle to the use of non-addictive substances that enhance self-awareness. What the precept objects to is the taking of substances that lead to a loss of mindfulness (*pamāda*). Anything that *increases* mindfulness would then appear to be in accordance with the spirit of the precept.

At the same time, a distinction can be drawn between 'treatment' and 'enhancement', and the task of medicine is normally thought of as curing defects rather than making improvements. The line between the two, however, is blurred, and the titanium orthopaedic implants in use today, for example, seem to be both a treatment and an enhancement insofar as they are more durable than the joints that nature provides. As technology advances, moreover, what today is seen as enhancement may tomorrow be seen as routine treatment.

Another common objection to Transhumanist immortality is that the desire to live forever is misguided because it assumes the existence of a self, which Buddhism denies. Transhumanists have a reply, however, which is that rather than seeking to preserve an unchanging self, what extending one's lifetime can do—especially if this involves uploading one's personality and memory to a cyber-host or merging with a higher intelligence—is enable a greater connection to others. By becoming part of a vast network, the sense of self would be diminished. Indeed, it may be that physical embodiment is a significant obstacle to perceiving the truth of no-self. Furthermore, if

awakened beings form part of the same network, the prospects for achieving enlightenment may be greatly enhanced. What could be more helpful than a 24/7 connection to the mind of an enlightened teacher?

The brain as computer

But is such a connection really possible? Much speculation about 'virtual persons' depends on a model of the brain as a computer that manipulates and stores data. Research psychologist Robert Epstein points to Ray Kurzweil's book *How to Create a Mind: The Secret of Human Thought Revealed* (2013) as an example of this. Epstein notes that Kurzweil talks about 'the "algorithms" of the brain, how the brain "processes data", and even how it superficially resembles integrated circuits in its structure' (Epstein 2016). In terms of this model, which has been influential for over half a century, transferring data from an organic host to a machine is simply a matter of developing the right kind of interface. The Neurolink corporation founded by Elon Musk has developed a device of this kind called 'NI.' The device incorporates a small chip with minuscule probes that weave inside the brain and is connected to an inductive coil near the ear.

Sceptics like Epstein, however, believe there are fundamental problems with this way of thinking, and that the 'information processing' (IP) metaphor of the brain as computer is flawed because the function of the human nervous system is not digital. Memories, for example, are not data 'stored' in neurons to be accessed and processed on demand. Proposing an alternative view of the brain Epstein writes:

> A few cognitive scientists—notably Anthony Chemero of the University of Cincinnati, the author of *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science* (2009)—now completely reject the view that the human brain works like a computer. The mainstream view is that we, like computers, make sense of the world by performing computations on mental representations of it, but Chemero and others describe another way of understanding intelligent behaviour—as a *direct interaction* between organisms and their world. (Epstein 2016)

Attempts to simulate the human brain using supercomputers have so far been unimpressive, a case in point being the $1.3 billion Human Brain Project launched by the European Union in 2013. Despite a lack of progress in the field, according to Epstein, 'the mainstream cognitive sciences continue to wallow uncritically in the IP metaphor, and some of the world's most influential thinkers have made grand predictions about humanity's future that depend on the validity of the metaphor.' His conclusion is stark:

> We are organisms, not computers. *Get over it.* Let's get on with the business of trying to understand ourselves, but without being encumbered by unnecessary intellectual baggage. The IP metaphor has had a half-century run, producing few, if any, insights along the way. The time has come to hit the DELETE key. (2016, original emphasis)

A brave new world?

Apart from technical and conceptual problems, some see a tension in the Transhumanist Declaration between the utilitarian imperative to seek 'the well-being of all sentience', while at the same time 'respecting autonomy and individual rights'. Critics allege that individual rights and freedoms will inevitably be side-lined in the dash by large corporations led by visionary entrepreneurs to implement new technologies which will be limited to the rich. Political scientists Jürgen Habermas and Francis Fukuyama have expressed concern that Transhumanism as a political ideology will undermine the values of the liberal state and lead to a dystopic society. Fukuyama asks what will become of society if human nature is reconfigured such that citizens become more docile and manageable as envisaged in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). He warns that Transhumanity's social engineering may be a back door to dehumanization and the return of totalitarianism.

Others see in the penumbra of the Transhumanist Declaration an ideology that makes scientific reasoning the ultimate authority and denigrates belief-systems based on religious or spiritual truth. These sceptics reject the Transhumanist claim that the best way to fix human problems is through science and technology. They point out that there have been technological developments throughout human history, from the invention of the wheel onwards, yet none has overcome the problem of human suffering. Many, in fact, have been a double-edged sword: splitting the atom produced both nuclear energy and the atomic bomb, and the invention of the automobile increased mobility but at the cost of CO^2 emissions. In the same way, disembodied minds may simply develop new forms of neurosis, and a network of discrete minds in cyberspace may turn out to resemble the multiple personalities of a schizophrenic.

Faults, furthermore, can develop in even the most sophisticated AI: software and hardware upgrades will presumably be needed and may not always go according to plan. In sum, suffering may be endemic in life in a way that defies technological solution. While Buddhism may be sympathetic to the aims of Transhumanism in reducing suffering, then, it is unlikely to see the Singularity as an alternative to nirvana.

Learning resources for this chapter

Key points

- In contrast to its often-hostile relationship with Abrahamic religions like Christianity, science seems to be on much better terms with Buddhism. Both value reason and empirical evidence and share the goals of improving the human condition, reducing suffering, and enhancing well-being. Buddhist modernists seek to accelerate the convergence between Buddhism and science by minimising the importance of traditional beliefs like karma and rebirth or reinterpreting them in ways consistent with science.
- While Buddhism and science coincide on many points, science also challenges traditional Buddhist beliefs in karma and rebirth. Techniques like cloning and IVF, for example, show that life can be created in the laboratory, apparently without any need for the presence of a departed consciousness (*gandhabba*), and cryonics suggests that an individual can be reanimated after death.
- Buddhism, as a technology for human enhancement, employs techniques such as mindfulness and meditation and seems to share some of the aims of Transhumanism. Buddhist mythology speaks of humans evolving to live for thousands of years in utopian conditions on earth. It also believes that human beings can evolve into supernatural beings.
- Transhumanism seems to be aligned with one of the central aims of the bodhisattva path, namely, to save beings from suffering. If a person's consciousness can be uploaded into the cloud, however, it seems there is no longer any need for a Buddhist solution to the problem of suffering.
- Today, Buddhist meditators collaborate with neuroscientists in studying the effects of meditation on mind and body. Some believe that emerging neurotechnologies can be integrated with religious practice to enhance mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. It remains to be seen, however, whether the concept of the 'digital person' which underlies more ambitious technological aims is anything more than a metaphor.

Discussion questions

1. In what ways is Buddhism in harmony with science?
2. What points of disagreement are there (if any) between Buddhism and science?
3. Can karma be explained by genetics?
4. Is 'Buddhist modernism' really Buddhism?
5. What is the 'Singularity'?
6. Will Transhumanism eventually replace Buddhism?
7. Would you like to be enhanced in the way Transhumanists propose? If not, why not?

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Index