The Buddhist conception of morality

By Michel Clasquin-Johnson

Paper delivered at the Pro Mores Seminar, University of Pretoria, 12 September 2022

Let's try a little thought experiment. You are a Jewish, Christian or Muslim thinker in say, Thailand or Mongolia. One day, the local university asks you to come speak to a predominantly Buddhist audience on the topic of your tradition's attitude towards, let's say, the Fifth level of Meditation (*jhana)*, also known as "Infinity of Space". It is always nice to be included of course, but what are you supposed to tell them? Yes, your tradition has its own meditative traditions, and casting around, you can find a rough analogue to what your audience wants to hear. But that's the best you can do. Your entire vocabulary is different, expressing different priorities.

Welcome to my world. At least this meeting is a little easier than some I have attended. Once I was asked to talk about "Buddhist spirituality". To a Buddhist, the word "spirituality" reeks of dualism, but one does not wish to upset one's hosts. Still, morality is universal, not so?

Well, Buddhists rarely talk about morality. Ethics, yes, there is an entire journal devoted to Buddhist ethics, not to mention a small library of books on the topic (e.g. Cozort and Shields 2018; Keown 2005; 2016; Powers and Prebish 2010; Thien and Tu 2019). "Morality", not so much. But we can't just pack up and go home. So, for our present purposes, I will ignore the differences between the terms and the rationales for preferring one over the other and regard them as synonymous. I trust that my fellow Buddhist scholars will forgive me.

And this conference is not only about Buddhism and the other religions. There are contexts in which we can just spout off a number of juicy quotations from ancient scriptures and be done with it. But in this seminar we have an additional factor. We want to take the last two centuries of scientific advances seriously. Morality was not invented, by the Buddha, Jesus or Aristotle. It existed before them. To explain Buddhist morality in terms of that, we need to construct something new, an understanding of Buddhism informed by evolution. I fear that my fellow Buddhist scholars will be less forgiving once I go down that route. Practising Buddhists, however, are unlikely to object. Consider that the Tibetan community in exile, in cooperation with Emory University, has made instruction in modern science compulsory for aspirant monks (Sen 2018; Valentin 2020; Yee 2009), a development directly initiated by the Dalai Lama. We can hardly do worse.

Let me ask a simple question: Is it more immoral to kill an elephant than to kill an ant? Most of us would reply in the affirmative. But are we arriving at that answer in the same way? Apparently not, or we would not need to spend two days exploring the various religious and philosophical rationales for living a moral life. Here is the Buddhist reason why killing an elephant is more morally incorrect than killing an ant:

"It takes more effort".

The degree of culpability is not measured by the act's effect on society, or on the environment. It is not caused by a mystical, innate "wrongness" that is part of the act itself. What matters is the effect it has on you, the actor. When you kill, you become a killer. When you steal, you become a thief.

The killer of elephants has taken more effort than the careless stepper-on-an-ant, and is therefore more of a killer. Every time, it becomes less of a moral issue to take the life of yet another elephant.

Acts, whether they are mental, verbal or physical, accumulatively affect one's character. This is what is commonly referred to as "karma". There is no cosmic accounting agency keeping track of what you have done and what rewards or punishments you deserve for it. It all happens within the bundle of thoughts, emotions, intentions and awareness that we conventionally refer to as "you".

The lay Buddhist will normally take five "vows" after taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This takes place in a ceremony in front of at least one monk. The aspiring Buddhist recites, either in a liturgical or a modern language:

- "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from onslaught on breathing beings." (Pali: *Pāṇātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*)
- "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from taking what is not given." (Pali: *Adinnādānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*)
- "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from misconduct concerning sense-pleasures." (Pali: *Kāmesumicchācāra veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*)
- "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from false speech." (Pali: *Musāvādā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*)
- "I undertake the training-precept to abstain from alcoholic drink or drugs that are an opportunity for heedlessness." (Pali: *Surāmerayamajjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi.*)

There are an additional three vows for special celebrations, which need not concern us here, all eight of them established by scriptures such as the Dhammika Sutta (Fausboll [sa]; Mills [sa]; Ireland 1994; Thanissaro Bhikkhu [sa]). For monks and nuns, the list stretches much further (227 rules for fully ordained monks (*bhikkhus*) and 311 for nuns (*bhikkhuṇīs*). What interests us here, though is the phrasing. These are not the Buddhist equivalent of the Ten Commandments, absolute commands laid down by the Buddha. Instead, they are rules of training, voluntary undertakings based on the Buddha's recommendations. There is an expectation that by following these training precepts, one will train oneself to become a specific kind of person. Not yet a Buddha, that takes far more effort, but at least one who is ready to take that next step that brings one closer to Buddhahood. These five rules are equivalent to the honesty declarations we make our students sign at examination time in the expectations that they will lead the student towards "graduateness". Sadly, they are broken just as often.

In East Asian Mahayana Buddhism, we enter another layer on top of this very basic moral substratum. Here we find the "Bodhisattva Vows". No longer is it enough to prepare oneself for Buddhahood, now the question is what to do with that Buddhahood when we get within range of it. There are generally thought to be four Bodhisattva vows. They exist in a number of subtle variations and inevitably, there is even more variation in the different translations that are used. The following is fairly typical, though:

- *Creations are numberless, I vow to free them.*
- *Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them.*

- *Reality is boundless, I vow to perceive it.*
- *The awakened way is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it (Upaya Zen Center 2021).*

This takes Buddhist ethics to a whole new level. Here, one undertakes to use whatever one has gained in one's training to single-handedly bring *all of creation* to Buddhahood, regardless of how long it takes. And in a tradition that believes in reincarnation, that can be a very long time indeed. We have moved from trainee morality to the morality of heroism. Of course, one may entertain doubts about the reality of multiple lives, but that takes nothing away from the grandeur of this aspiration.

> *Perhaps the most striking feature of the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist moral tradition is its conception of the bodhisattva who vows with infinite compassion to remain in saṃsāra for endless lives to work for the benefit of sentient beings. There is a sense in which this Buddhist saint's commitment transcends his theistic counterparts, who after all will shortly enter heaven and receive their eternal reward. The bodhisattva has no such respite; in fact many of his rebirths are fraught with sacrifice, including giving up limbs and even his life during the development of full Buddhahood. His vow is among the most remarkable ethical aspirations in the history of human thought (S. E. Harris 2018, 386).*

Perhaps we only have one life to live, but if your *intention* was to work for others for all eternity, can we deny that this is a profoundly moral point of view? While I have chosen the Mahayana vows as the clearest example of this shift, this is not a sectarian division. Even in earlier forms of Buddhism, we see an emphasis on the Buddha's decision to teach, to devote the rest of his life to the enlightenment of others, rather than just basking in his personal achievements. Different schools of Buddhism have tended to emphasize one of the two levels over the other in practice, but both are always present to some degree.

The first level of Buddhist morality, then, is roughly equivalent to Aristotelian virtue ethics. Not identical: even Damien Keown, the foremost proponent of Buddhist ethics as virtue ethics, has to admit that out of Aristotle's four cardinal virtues, the second one, justice, is conspicuously absent (Keown 2007, 102–3). Still, there is a family resemblance. The second level, however, is not classifiable in terms of ethical philosophy. It is a *religious* rather than a *philosophical* ethical response. It is not utilitarian ethic, for it vows to take care of *all* living beings, not merely the greatest possible number.

Now that we have an overview of the basic ideas of Buddhist ethics, let us take a ten-million year step back and consider what we can make of this in the light of modern scientific knowledge.

We start off in Africa, which is covered from west coast to east coast in thick forest. A variety of primates scamper about in the branches. They are omnivorous, robbing birds' nests and catching small animals when they can, but mainly they eat fruit.

What happens to this tropical idyll? Climate change. Africa itself starts to break apart. The Great Rift Valley starts to form, creating deep valleys, high mountain ridges and a string of long, deep lakes, forming barriers to migration that persist to the present (Manthey et al. 2022). Further east, India slams into Asia, throwing up the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau. The result of this is that monsoon patterns change and the eastern half of Africa starts to dry out (Fluteau, Ramstein, and Besse 1999). Over millions of years, the forest largely disappears and is replaced by grasslands and scrub savannah.

Let’s take a look at how three different groups of primates responded to this. One group retained its ancestral lifestyle. Their descendants are still around, but they are largely restricted to the coastal fringes of the continent. We know them as vervet monkeys.

Another group did adapt to the dry open conditions. They evolved to the dangerously open conditions of the savannah in what we might call the traditional way, by tightening their social cohesion and evolving considerably dangerous weapons. Fun fact: a large male baboon has longer canine teeth than a leopard. The baboons have done well for themselves.

The third group, of course, is us. Like the baboons, we expanded our already omnivorous diet to include more animal protein. Unlike the baboons, we did not evolve offensive weaponry. We externalized our teeth and claws in the form of sharpened rocks and sticks. The human shoulder became a throwing machine without parallel in the animal kingdom. The end result of this was that we spread out of Africa to become the most widespread primate species.

What baboons and humans have in common, though, is that both had to change their social structure. The happy-go-lucky structure of tree-dwelling fruit-eaters no longer sufficed when a predator could see you from long distances. Both had to adopt a social set-up that closely resembled those of lions, wolves and African hunting dogs. Primates turned into social carnivores.

It is my contention that any theory of morality that does not acknowledge this heritage is doomed from the outset. We divide labour roles, like lions (lions guard the territory, lionesses hunt). We form familial hierarchies, like wolves. Even when forced into conglomerations of millions, we maintain small, close-knit social groups of like-minded individuals, groups rarely more than twenty or thirty strong. Even when gathered plant materials provided most of the nutrition, as is almost inevitably the case in hunter-gatherer groups, even when an individual becomes a vegetarian, as I have, we can never shake off the heritage of millions of years of existence of life in small bands of social carnivores. It is who we are, the way we experience the world. And this is the root of our ethical problem.

In a given situation, do we obey the social or the carnivorous aspects of our heritage? To a Buddhist, this is the root of our tendency to see reality in dualistic terms, ethical and unethical, good and evil. Meanwhile the situation itself is neither. It is simply what it is. We always have the choice to see through either of these lenses. Or, more likely, through both, simultaneously, to varying degrees. Morality, at its best, emphasizes the social aspect at the expense of the carnivorous. Morality, at its worst, does the exact opposite. From the Buddhist perspective, the role of religion is not to boost either the social or the carnivorous aspect. It is to discard both, however difficult that may be, and experience reality as it is. But have I not just said that we can “never” do that? Indeed, this is why Buddhas are so rare.

I will conclude by showing how Buddhism would react to the famous trolley problem. We’ve all seen it: There is a trolley track that spits into two, with a lever that decides which way the trolley will go. On the left-hand track, there is a person tied up. On the right-hand track, there are *four* people tied up. Which way do you pull the lever and why? The answer to this question supposedly uncovers the ethical theory to which one prescribes. Then you can start to vary the variables. What if the one person is more valuable to society than the four? What if one of the four is a child?

As a Buddhist I have serious problems with this thought experiment. It is never stated if there are people inside the trolley who can also be injured. Well, let’s just suppose the trolley is empty. More comprehensively, what kind of a world is it where people are tied up on trolley tracks, ready to be

run over? What kind of world is it in which this is even considered a suitable example for a thought experiment? What can we do to eliminate the trolley problem even as a possibility, even as a thought-experiment? The trolley problem is ethics seen from the carnivorous rather than the social aspect of our existence, where doing less harm is prioritized over doing good.

Still, let's play the game and give a Buddhist answer to the trolley problem. In fact, let me give two. Both involve playing the game by not playing it, by refusing to accept the rules.

The first response is to do nothing, to leave the course of the trolley to chance. Or, if you prefer religious language, leave it to the karma of the tied-up people. This is the approach of the *pacekka-buddha*, the silent Buddha who knows but does not teach. It is not a situation where one is petrified into immobility, but a principled decision not to play the game. To pull the lever and save four people does not outweigh or remove the karmic effects of having killed the one. By doing nothing, the karmic effects remain with those who tied the people up and sent the trolley on its way.

The second response is to throw *yourself* on the track before it splits, sacrificing yourself for the benefit of the five tied-up people. This is the Buddha's ethics of heroism, the final victory of the social over the carnivorous. But both are valid Buddhist moral responses.

In the recorded life of the Buddha, we can see both in action. The Buddha went to great lengths to prevent a war between two rival states over the right to dam a small stream (Mingun Sayadaw 2019; Sisyphus 2013), but when Kosala was about to annex the northern city-states, including his own city of Kapilavastu, he did nothing. The time of the city-states was over, their incorporation into a larger empire was inevitable. Buddhas do not fight against inevitability. Instead, he advised the royal minister Vassakāra to conduct the planned annexation in such a way that it would be relatively bloodless, but still have the desired effect (Mazza 2021; Ven. Pandita 2011). The issue of the morality of war has been a key problem in Buddhism ever since (e.g. E. J. Harris 2001; Jerryson 2011; Ling 1979; Victoria 2013; 2015).

And of course, we can see examples of the ethics of heroism elsewhere in the history of religions. We see it in the self-sacrifice of Jesus. In the Buddhist analysis, it does not matter if he rose on the third day, or if his death actually saved the world from damnation. His sincere belief that this was the case, that his excruciating death would save the entire world, is what makes this a heroic ethical act, worthy of any bodhisattva.

A few centuries later, however, we see Christians going out of their way to antagonize the Roman authorities and be martyred (Vincelette 2019). To the Buddhist, this is far more questionable. Did they do this to secure their own place in the afterlife or was it for the sake of others?

However, we do not always have time for long philosophical ruminations about ethical actions. An ethical situation presents itself and an action is needed, right now. How do we know what to do, in a split-second? This is where the ethics of training comes in. Years of training in conventionally ethical behaviour, coupled with years of clearing the mind of irrelevant distractions, readies the person to make the correct decision when the time to decide arrives. What that decision will be cannot be predicted. It will be made when the situation arises, and not a millisecond before.

And so we see that while day-to-day moral life in Buddhism does not differ much from that in any other society, the underlying ethical thinking, the reasons given for acting morally, are quite uniquely Buddhist.

References cited

Cozort, Daniel, and James Mark Shields. 2018. *The Oxford Handbook of Buddhist Ethics*. Oxford University Press.

Fausboll, V. [sa]. “Sutta-Nipata 2.14 Dhammika Sutta.” Wikipitaka - The Completing Tipitaka. [sa]. https://tipitaka.fandom.com/wiki/SUTTA-NIPATA_2.14_DHAMMIKA_SUTTA.

Fluteau, Frédéric, G. Ramstein, and Jean Besse. 1999. “Simulating the Evolution of the Asian and African Monsoons During the Past 30 Myr Using an Atmospheric General Circulation Model.” *Journal of Geophysical Research: Atmospheres* 104 (D10): 11995–18. https://doi.org/10.1029/1999JD900048.

Harris, Elizabeth J. 2001. “Buddhism in War: A Study of Cause and Effect from Sri Lanka.” *Culture and Religion* 2 (2): 197–222. https://doi.org/10.1080/01438300108567175.

Harris, Stephen E. 2018. “Promising Across Lives to Save Non-Existent Beings: Identity, Rebirth, and the Bodhisattva’s Vow.” *Philosophy East and West* 68 (2): 386–407. https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2018.0037.

Ireland, John D. 1994. “Dhammika Sutta.” Access to Insight. 1994. https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.14.irel.html.

Jerryson, Michael K. 2011. *Buddhist Fury: Religion and Violence in Southern Thailand*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

Keown, Damien. 2005. *Buddhist Ethics: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP Oxford.

———. 2007. “Buddhism and Ecology: A Virtue Ethics Approach.” *Contemporary Buddhism* 8 (2): 97–112. https://doi.org/10.1080/14639940701636083.

———. 2016. *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics*. Springer.

Ling, Trevor. 1979. *Buddhism, Imperialism and War. Burma and Thailand in Modern History*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Manthey, Joseph D., Yann Bourgeois, Yonas Meheretu, and Stéphane Boissinot. 2022. “Varied Diversification Patterns and Distinct Demographic Trajectories in Ethiopian Montane Forest Bird (Aves: Passeriformes) Populations Separated by the Great Rift Valley.” *Molecular Ecology* 31 (9): 2664–78. https://doi.org/10.1111/mec.16417.

Mazza, Daniele. 2021. “How Did the Buddha Deal with Conflicts During His Life? A Theravāda Perspective [PREPRINT].” ResearchGate. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12107.52008.

Mills, Laurence Khantipalo. [sa]. “Dhammikasutta.” SuttaCentral. [sa]. https://suttacentral.net/snp2.14/en/mills.

Mingun Sayadaw. 2019. “War Between the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu and of Koliya.” Wisdom Library. September 4, 2019. https://www.wisdomlib.org/buddhism/book/the-great-chronicle-of-buddhas/d/doc364526.html.

Powers, John, and Charles S. Prebish. 2010. *Destroying Mara Forever: Buddhist Ethics Essays in Honor of Damien Keown*. Shambhala Publications.

Sen, Priyadarshini. 2018. “Buddhist Monks Are Learning Science At A ‘Mini Cosmos’ Near Mysore.” Https://Www.Outlookindia.Com/. September 12, 2018. https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/buddhsit-monks-are-learning-science/316400.

Sisyphus. 2013. “How The Buddha Prevented A Bloody War.” *The Daily Enlightenment* (blog). November 28, 2013. https://thedailyenlightenment.com/2013/11/how-the-buddha-prevented-a-bloody-war/.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu. [sa]. “Sn 2:14 Dhammika.” Dhammatalks. [sa]. https://www.dhammatalks.org/suttas/KN/StNp/StNp2_14.html.

Thien, Thich Duc, and Thich Nhat Tu, eds. 2019. *Buddhist Approach to Global Education in Ethics*. Ho Chi Minh City: Vietnam Buddhist University Publications. https://tinyurl.com/y8yejrx9.

Upaya Zen Center. 2021. “The Four Great Bodhisattva Vows.” *Upaya Zen Center* (blog). 2021. https://www.upaya.org/teachings/liturgy/four-great-bodhisattva-vows/.

Valentin. 2020. “Enlightenments Entwined: Modern Science at the Monastic University.” *Research Features* (blog). December 2, 2020. https://researchfeatures.com/enlightenments-entwined-modern-science-monastic-university/.

Ven. Pandita. 2011. “The Buddha and the Māgadha-Vajjī War.” *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 18: Unpaginated. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/291043681_The_Buddha_and_the_Magadha-Vajji_war.

Victoria, Brian Daizen. 2013. “Violence-Enabling Mechanisms in Buddhism.” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 5 (November): 170–211. http://jocbs.org/index.php/jocbs/article/view/67.

———. 2015. “An Ethical Critique of Wartime Zen.” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 9 (November): 179–212. http://jocbs.org/index.php/jocbs/article/view/123.

Vincelette, Alan. 2019. “On the Frequency of Voluntary Martyrdom in the Patristic Era.” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 70 (2): 652–79. https://doi.org/10.1093/jts/flz108.

Yee, Amy. 2009. “Tibetan Monks and Nuns Turn Their Minds Toward Science.” *The New York Times*, June 29, 2009, sec. Science. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/30/science/30monks.html.