Journal of Buddhist Ethics Volume 3 1996: 66-72

ISSN 1076-9005

Response: Visions and Revisions in Buddhist Ethics

Christopher Ives
University of Puget Sound

Publication Date: 10 March 1996

Complementing his creation of the new electronic journal, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, Charles Prebish has assembled on this panel prominent scholars in the newly-emergent field of Buddhist ethics. In their papers they investigate several strands of Theravāda and Mahāyāna ethical reflection. By bringing philological tools to bear on key texts and analyzing modes of ethical argumentation, they extend their inquiry beyond descriptive ethics to the level of meta-ethics, and thereby provide fertile ground for the work of other Buddhologists and ethicists in general.

Dan Cozort's paper, "Cutting the Roots of Virtue": Tsongkhapa on the Results of Anger," examines Tsongkhapa's writings on anger in relation to earlier Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. Cozort broaches the possibility that Buddhist views of anger as a "root affliction" (kleśa) that "cuts the roots of virtue" force the conclusion that angry people may be unable to achieve liberation. To Tsongkhapa, one of the main problems with the emotion of anger is the ascription of autonomy to the object of anger. This reification or hypostatisation of the object of anger entangles the angry one in his or her own mental constructs and resultant suffering. However, when the notion that a mere moment of anger can cause the loss of aeons of virtue is juxtaposed with the doctrine of śūnyatā, certain questions arise. For example, might Tsongkhapa's tradition itself be succumbing to reification—of an emotion, rather than the object thereof—in its attempt to critique anger?

One might also wonder whether the negative valuation of anger is only in response to the unenlightened substantialization of the object of one's anger. Cozort outlines how the consequences of anger are disastrous if the object of the anger is a bodhisattva. Presumably, a bodhisattva is an individual who has stayed in the realm of saṃsāra in order to take on the suffering of sentient beings andkindly lead them to liberation. Though generally Tsongkhapa does not concern himself with the effects of anger on its object, if there is any individual who would not be expected to react to anger with further anger or any other kind of emotional entanglement, one would expect this to be the bodhisattva (all past kindnesses aside). In other words, if concerned compassionately about the relative exacerbation of suffering in the world, a Mahāyāna Buddhist could argue that along the spectrum of individuals with whom one might be angry, the best person to be angry with would be a bodhisattva, for the net effect in terms of increased entanglement and suffering presumably would be less in that case.

Granted, given the status of bodhisattvas in Mahāyāna Buddhism, anger toward them might be seen as contrary, for example, to precepts against defaming the Three Jewels. However, even allowing for textual and philosophical bases for this construal of anger toward a bodhisattva, data about the institutional and historical contexts of the formulation of Mahāyāna prohibitions against anger might prove illuminating. Perhaps the issue of anger toward high-ranking Buddhist figures such as bodhisattvas says more about the political organization of and conflict in the Sangha than about the religious status of these figures.

Cozort also cites a contemporary Gelugpa scholar who maintains that anger will indeed have a disastrous effect on the roots of virtue, as argued 600 years earlier by Tsongkhapa. Although this claim may make sense in terms of a leading scholar remaining faithful to traditional, orthodox sources, one might wonder whether Tibetan leaders of a less scholarly bent—with a more pastoral orientation, as it were—might be expressing different stances in response to possible anger harbored by their Tibetan lay followers. Specifically, how have Tibetan lamas responded to the kind of anger one might expect to have emerged from the Tibetan community? To what extent might there be room in Tibetan Buddhist doctrine for an "upāyic" accommodation of anger in a specific historical state of oppression? Though this line of questioning may be based on a culturally biased ascription of emotions to this Asian community (perhaps most Tibetans have not responded to events in 1949 and 1959 with anger), it is interesting to wonder how Tibetans are handling the anger, if any, they might be experiencing in response to the Chinese government. Here, too, a linkage between classical texts or scholastic exegesis and concrete ethnographic data would shed important light on the formulation and application of Tibetan ethical systems in actual communities, monastic or layIn his examination of the issue of suicide in early Buddhism, Damien Keown probes the multivalency of Pali terms in a canonical account of an (apparent) arhat's suicide and formulates a provocative interpretation of the traditional Buddhist approach to suicide. Keown concludes that the tradition "neatly avoids" the dilemma of an arhat breaking precepts by arguing that the individual in question achieved enlightenment only after cutting his throat, and hence was not technically an arhat at the beginning of the suicidal act. One might wonder how, exactly, the act of slitting one's throat causes an enlightenment experience. Though the text mentions a recognition of unenlightenment that somehow led to an arousal of insight concurrent with the act of cutting the throat, and though it may be difficult to argue that, in principle, the act of slitting the throat could never be accompa-

nied by enlightenment, without further explanation one is tempted to conclude that the tradition has advanced an *ad hoc* resolution to a difficult religious (and institutional?) problem.

The idea that suicide can somehow enlighten the person echoes certain articulations of the connection between Zen and samurai, where Japanese thinkers have argued that the sword is not for taking life but for "giving life," apparently in the sense of triggering some sort of realization in people who cut with or are cut by the blade.

Further, the apparently ad hoc solution to the issue of an arhat's suicide seems to parallel an issue that many in the Zen tradition are currently facing: behavior by ostensibly enlightened rōshi ("Zen masters") that is ethically problematical and hence unexpected from someone of purportedly advanced realization. Similar to the response to an apparent arhat's suicide, some have argued that the rōshi involved in unethical behavior are actually not enlightened, but this resolution of the issue of the apparent lack of connection between the rōshi and ethical behavior strikes at the heart of the tradition's claim of a supposedly unbroken lineage of enlightened Zen teachers stretching back to the Buddha himself. Others have argued that one should not expect an enlightened person to demonstrate moral rectitude or perfection, but this response to the issue of unethical rōshi undermines the Zen and broader Mahāyāna Buddhist claim that enlightened individuals are equipped with wisdom (prajñā) and compassion (karuṇā).

Perhaps there are other Theravādan texts that could provide a persuasive response to question of whether the Theravādan tradition is splitting hairs with the arhat's razor. And perhaps some members of the audience listening to this panel might wish that the Theravādan tradition had been blessed with Occam, for in this case his razor might prove useful.

In bringing "ethical particularism" to our attention, Charles Hallisey provides an intriguing angle on Theravāda Buddhist ethics. A first question that one might pose to his paper is that of the degree to which "ethical particularism" characterizes not only the Maṅgalasutta but Buddhism in general. A second query is that of whether a community's lack of agreement on a criterion or a single meta-ethical principle through which one can determine whether specific things are instances of a duty or virtue such as "auspiciousness" (maṅgala) leads us only to the conclusion that there is simply a particular consensus about which actions are instances of that specific duty or virtue.

One possibility that must be entertained here is that there is something common to the particular cases that individuals agree constitute "auspiciousness," but people at that time in South Asia could not agree on what it was or give the commonality an adequate articulation (through an inductive process of reasoning). In his paper, Hallisey seems to allow for the possibility of commonality (and perhaps principles or criteria), when he states that in the context of ethical particularism "we develop a sense of judgment" and "some general truths are evident." In short, what we may be encountering here is not ethical particularism but a historical situation in which other issues—whether social, political, linguistic, or semantic—precluded explicit consensus or definitional statements about what constitutes"auspiciousness." Perhaps further textual analysis would indicate that in fact there are certain principles operative in such moral categories as "auspiciousness."

But if in fact "auspiciousness" does simply refer to an agreed-upon cluster of actions without any demonstrable commonality or principles linking them, one must ask whether we are dealing with "ethics" per se or simply with convention. In other words, at what point does ethical particularism become something other than ethics? Or is a definition of "ethics" that excludes convention overly narrow?

In his analysis of key Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, David Chappell highlights for us the fact that the ways Buddhologists classify and group texts do not necessarily correspond with how actual Buddhists and their religious communities draw from those texts to meet various ethical and philosophical needs. Chappell also highlights different notions of skillful means (upāya) and compassion (karuṇā). His discussion causes me to wonder about the basis, if any, on which one might be compelled to see skillful means or compassion as ethical. One might wonder whether upāya and karuṇā are primarily religious (in the more existential sense), not ethical, and may function in ways that seem contrary to ordinary ethics. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, might there not be an element of what Kierkegaard referred to as a "teleological suspension of the ethical," especially when upāya takes the form of actions that violate certain precepts or Buddhist values. (One extreme example of this is the Ch'an teacher Chü-ji (J. Gutei) supposedly inducing enlightenment by cutting off the finger of an acolyte who had imitated him.)

Of course, enlightenment may be held up as the ultimate telos, and in this sense could be regarded as a kind of "good" or summum bonum, which would grant a certain ethical status to compassion and

skillful means. But though those who expound enlightenment in this way may still face questions about the usage of the term "good" (both nominally and adjectivally) in relation to the notion of enlightenment, i.e., about the degree to which we can justifiably stretch ethical categories.

At one point in his paper Chappell writes that the Confucian system in Japan prohibited social involvement on the part of Buddhists. Strictly speaking, this was not the case, though Chappell may be thinking of social involvement in terms of certain modern types of social action entered into voluntarily by Buddhist institutions. During the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), Buddhists were highly involved in the largely Confucian political system. At that time Buddhist institutions served as an arm of the Tokugawa government, with priests serving as de facto officials, disseminating Confucian learning in temple schools (tera-koya), and performing rituals for the protection of the realm and its rulers. Following an anti-Buddhist campaign in the early years of the Meiji Period (1868-1912), Buddhists participated actively in the socio-political arena in order to justify themselves as socially useful in a rapidly industrializing and militarizing Japan, and this attempt to be of social utility led to active involvement in the unfolding of Japanese imperialism prior to and during the Pacific War.In short, Buddhist social involvement is not necessarily a post-war phenomenon. Perhaps the issue to consider here is the exact circumstances and motivations behind social involvement by Buddhists, and the forms that involvement took, rather than the issue of whether they were or were not involved. Simply put, Buddhists have always been involved in Japanese society and politics, though this involvement has taken different forms at different points in time, some of which may run contrary to the modern and in large part western values operating in social activist circles in postwar Japan.

These brief remarks are intended simply to highlight certain questions that emerged out of my reading of these four excellent papers and do not do justice to the scholarship done by these scholars of Buddhism and ethics. It is clear that Charles Prebish and Damien Keown, the two main editors of the *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, as well as the other three panelists, have made a major contribution to the study of Buddhism and ethics. These Buddhologists offer rich material for those whose interests gravitate toward descriptive ethics or meta-ethics, and they highlight ways in which prominent Buddhists have engaged in normative ethical reflection as part of their tradition.

Importantly for all scholars of Buddhism and ethics, the papers have also highlighted a key set of questions: What are the central ethical values, if any, in and across various strands of Buddhism? What are the main ethical theories and modes of argumentation that characterize Buddhism? To what extent are Buddhist thinkers and communities bound to earlier canonical sources? On what bases can Buddhists provide ethical insight into contemporary issues? To what extent might a Buddhological focus on texts obscure the actual ethical reflection of Buddhist communities? By implicitly raising these questions and offering some initial responses to them, these four papers constitute an important milestone in the new field of Buddhist ethics and point to numerous avenues of further inquiry.