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Wisdom, Compassion, and Moral Responsibility under the Buddhist Doctrine of Non-Self

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Abstract

Buddhist ethics makes the connection between philosophical analysis and moral cultivation: How does suffering come about and how can it come to an end? This article looks at a concentrated issue in this tradition, namely, the maintenance of moral responsibility, in the face of Buddha's doctrine of no permanent self. It aims to discuss the connection of wisdom and compassion, to clarify the function of intention, kamma, dependent co-origination and non-self, and to evaluate if they provide an integrated view of moral responsibility. The research method used is a qualitative approach which is carried out through textual and philosophical approaches. Results of some chosen passages from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* and *Aṅguttara Nikāya* are read together with some contemporary texts on virtue ethics, consequentialism, personal identity, and Buddhist moral philosophy. The results reveal that the Buddhist responsibility is not based on the permanent and unchanging metaphysical agent. It is based upon

deliberate actions, continuity of causes, character development, and continuity of convention of persons. Wisdom reveals the impermanent, empty, illusory nature of experience and compassion puts it in service to the alleviation of suffering. The analysis also reveals that Buddhist ethics are not completely virtue ethics or consequentialism, as it combines the factors of motive, discipline, character, consequences, and liberating insight. The article concludes that no one can take away accountability. When correctly understood it transfers responsibility in interdependent processes and it enables a discipline of compassion that is pertinent to today's moral issues.

Keywords: Buddhist ethics, compassion, dependent co-origination, non-self, suffering

1. Introduction

Buddhist ethics and philosophy constitute one of the most elaborate traditions of the moral and intellectual history of mankind. Facing systems where metaphysical reflection is divorced from ethical obligation, Buddhist thought is based on the idea that philosophy and ethics are aspects of a single practical project: to comprehend and to put an end to suffering. Questions of reality, personhood, causality and knowledge cannot be considered out of context with questions of conduct responsibility and liberation. Buddhist ethics in this sense is not just a set of rules to follow in life, but an explanation of how one should live given the real sense of existence (Gethin, 1998; Rahula, 1974). Primary textual support for this incorporation of philosophical understanding and moral practice is found in the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (DN 4), which gives ethics and wisdom as each other's purifying factors (Walshe, 1995).

In the early Buddhist analysis explored here, a term frequently translated as suffering, dissatisfaction or existential unsatisfactoriness, *dukkha*, is the beginning of the understanding of the need for moral cultivation. Because of craving, ignorance and attachment, human life is not stable; it is subject to conflict, subject to loss; it is subject to changes, which is considered a self and the impermanent is considered secure. The moral path, therefore, directly targets the mental dispositions that result in suffering, by setting boundaries on the destructive conditions, cultivating positive ones, and developing wisdom (Harvey, 2000; Kalupahana, 1975).

The problem of *dukkha*, which can be simply translated as suffering, dissatisfaction, or existential unsatisfactoriness is the centre of Buddhist thought. Buddhist diagnosis: creatures are afflicted by the

reasons of being caught up in craving, ignorance and clinging to the impermanent. Instead of the world being harsh and the external conditions being challenging, human life is unstable, in conflict and in loss, not because the world is harsh but because the mind is misguided and attached to the perceived eternal self in the changing conditions of the world (Harvey, 2000; Kalupahana, 1975). Ethics is not, thus, an extrinsic part of the Buddhist path. It is a necessary way through which destructive states of mind are kept in check, good qualities are nurtured and wisdom is achieved.

This essay explores the connection between Buddhist philosophy and ethics by specifically exploring some fundamental teachings: the Four Noble Truths, *kamma*, Dependent Co-origination, non-self, compassion and the path of moral cultivation. This paper maintains that Buddhist ethics should be thought of as a liberation oriented and transformative moral philosophy. It is transformative since it aims at reforming the character, perception and motivations of the moral agent; it is liberation-oriented since its endpoint is the absence of suffering and delusion and not of social conformity or obedience to law. Buddhist ethics cannot, therefore, be sufficiently narrowed down to a set of external commands or abstract principles. It deals with the development of individuals who can act responsibly and with a merciful nature in a conditioned world (Keown, 2001; Gowans, 2015). Specifically, it asks what is the sense the person can be a moral agent if he is not a permanent substance, but a conditioned process?

It is a significant topic due to a number of reasons. To begin with, the Buddhist philosophy provides a unique means of basing ethics without referring to a creator God, an unchanging soul or a moral lawgiver. Second, Buddhist ideology poses some deep questions about

whether moral responsibility can exist without a substantial self. Third, the Buddhist traditions have created an abundance of material to be discussed in modern environmental ethics, social justice, peace studies and medical ethics (Kaza, 2000; King, 2009; McCormick, 2013). Lastly, in a world becoming more and more anxious, warring, ecologically unsustainable, and antagonistic based on identity, Buddhist ethics provides a way of thinking that stresses interdependence, discipline, compassion and mindfulness.

1.1. Research Problem & Gap

The main research question is why the notion of a permanent self is denied by the Buddha while the person's notion of intention, action, consequence, and moral responsibility is maintained? Lots of studies have discussed Buddhist ethics either using virtue, in terms of consequences, in terms of compassion or in terms of liberation, and studies on non-self have focused primarily on the issue of personal identity. Fewer efforts have been made to bring together the issue of wisdom and compassion and their relevance for moral responsibility in a non-substantialist theory of the person. This article fills in this gap, but does not attempt to cover all aspects of Buddhism. The primary sources of analysis are texts from the early period of Buddhist history; only a few Mahāyāna materials are employed to investigate the further development of the argument with the Bodhisattva ideal.

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To study the notions of non-self, non-intention and causal continuity as they are described in the selected early Buddhist documents.
2. To explore the combined effects of the two dimensions of wisdom and compassion in fostering moral responsibility in the absence of a permanent, metaphysical self.

3. To assess the extent to which Buddhist ethics can be considered as a kind of virtue ethics or consequentialism or whether it is a unique moral framework of liberation.

1.3. Research Questions

1. How is it possible to talk of moral responsibility in the Buddhist worldview of not-self?
2. How do elements like intention, causal continuity, wisdom and compassion fit in that account?
3. What is the way in which this account is unique in terms of the philosophical understanding of Buddhist ethics?

The article has been divided into six parts. In Section 1 you will find the research problem, research objectives and research questions. This is followed by a review of the pertinent textual and scholarly literature in Section 2. The qualitative text and philosophical approach are explained in section 3. The results related to the themes of transformation, wisdom, compassion, intention and moral responsibility are included in Section 4. Those findings are explored in the context of broader implications for some of the current moral dilemmas in Section 5. The conclusions and the contribution that the article offers are included in Section 6.

2. Literature Review

There are several important, though somewhat conflicting, interpretations of Buddhist ethics in the modern literature. It is read primarily either in a virtue-ethicist manner (Keown, 1992, 2001) or as a moral consequence: in a compassionate way (Goodman, 2009). Two other, more comprehensive approaches that incorporate intention, precepts, mental cultivation and liberation are those of Harvey (2000)

and Gowans (2015). Personality continuity is discussed in the context of not having an enduring self by Collins (1982) and Siderits (2003), whereas the spread of moral concern via the Bodhisattva ideal is explored by Williams (2009) and Śāntideva (1995). All of these works contribute to the main debates, and sometimes moral theory, non self, and compassion are considered three separate questions. What they have in common is the question which the present study poses – how wisdom and compassion make responsibility intelligible in a causally continuous but non-substantial conception of the person? The next subsections thus only discuss the doctrines required for the focused problem.

2.1. The Four Noble Truths as the Foundation of Buddhist Ethics

The Four Noble Truths are the main guidelines of Buddhist philosophy and morals. They do not merely consist of so many statements of doctrine to be assented to, but are existential things to be known, lived in and brought into actual existence. The initial truth is that the existence of conditions is one that is characterized by dukkha. Birth, old age, illness and death are the blatant sources of suffering as well as pleasure, which is not stable as they are changeable and impermanent. The second truth is the source of the suffering in craving (*taṇhah*), attachment and ignorance. The third truth testifies to the possibility of the end of suffering. The fourth truth is the Noble Eightfold Path which outlines the practical path to that cessation (Rahula, 1974; Bodhi, 2000). The fourfold is a structure that is mostly derived from the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (SN 56.11) which associates each truth with a task of understanding, abandoning, realising or cultivating (Bodhi, 2000).

These realities outline the Buddhist ethics in many significant ways. To begin with, they put suffering as the major ethical issue. The

Buddhist morality is not initiated by obedience to a certain authority, but by diagnosis of the human state of affairs. Second, they associate ethics with causality. There is no random suffering, but rather causes. Past behavior, thoughts and practice precondition the experience of the future. Thirdly, truths set out that morality is therapeutic and transformative in nature. Ethical behavior is not socially desirable but that is one of the ways that mend the mind and frustrate the basic causes of suffering.

Immediate are the ethical implications. When any misery is created by desire and ignorance, the vices of greed, hatred and delusion are not only metaphysical mistakes, but also the poisons of morality. Generosity, loving-kindness, mindfulness and wisdom on the other hand are morally important since they are the opposite of the causes of suffering. The ethics of Buddhism is therefore based on a close association between the descriptive understanding and the normative teaching that one should do what reduces suffering since suffering is entrenched in misconstructions of perception and desire which can be learned and changed (Harvey, 2000).

2.2. The Eightfold Path of Nobility and of Morality

The Noble Eightfold Path cultivates the practical aspect of Buddhist ethics. The path is traditionally broken down into wisdom (*paññā*), ethical conduct (*sīla*), and concentration (*samādhi*) and encompasses right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (Gethin, 1998; Nanamoli & Bodhi, 1995). Though the way can be analyzed and divided into parts, it is a whole process of moral and spiritual evolution.

Ethical behavior takes centre stage in this structure. Right speech prohibits false speech, divisive speech, speech that is harsh and idle talk. Right action outlaws killing, stealing and sexual misconduct. Right livelihood involves the fact that the way of making a living should not be hurtful. It is not a random commandment. They are trainings aimed at safeguarding oneself and others against misery as well as establishing mental states that are conducive to concentration and wisdom (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

The way shows that Buddhist morality is not rule-based, in a strict sense. Rules and precepts are essential but are a part of a larger cultivation process. Training in morality is conducted on speech, action, intention, attention and understanding. An individual who shuns murder but is full of hate has not accomplished the moral mission. Similarly, the person who tries to find wisdom and forgets about sincerity and kindness perceives it as wrong. In Buddhism, moral action, mental discipline and wisdom go hand in hand in a mutually supporting way, which is proved in the Eightfold Path.

2.3. *Kamma* and the Centrality of Intention

The *kamma* viewed as intentional action is one of the most distinguishing aspects of Buddhist ethics. Early Buddhist beliefs on *kamma* do not consider it fate, nor as a mere system of reward and punishment. Instead, *kamma* is more about volitional action and the causal results that are brought about by the said action (Bodhi, 2000; Jayatilleke, 1963). This renders intention as a point of evaluation of morality. *Kamma* is said to be intention (*cetanā*) in the Nibbedhika Sutta (AN 6.63) and this can be understood as the moral quality of a person's volition in the three-fold bases, body, speech and mind (Bodhi, 2012).

The focus on will implies that Buddhist ethics is so much concerned with the inner nature of the action. Two outwardly similar acts can be at variance in terms of morality based on their motivation. The ethics of a gift given out of compassion are completely different from those of a gift given out of vanity or manipulation. The psychological basis of action is important as actions are expressive and confirmatory of states of character. Greed causes unhealthy behavior and leads to additional bondage; generosity, non-hatred and wisdom lead to liberation (Keown, 1992; Harvey, 2000).

The intention-based focus does not imply the lack of relevance of consequences. Buddhism acknowledges that bad actions are painful irrespective of the intentions and prudent behavior should have real impacts. But it is moral psychology that is paramount. Buddhist ethics enquires about the type of mind that acts, what are the nourishing roots of that action and what are the patterns of becoming to which they give rise? In this sense it is more of a science of the transformation of character than of a simple exterior legal morality.

2.4. The Ethics of Interdependence, Dependent Co-origination

One of the fundamental philosophical Buddhist teachings is Dependent Co-origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). According to it, things come into existence based on causes and circumstances; there can be nothing that exists on its own and on its own terms. In the classical formulation, the conditioned arising of suffering is described based on ignorance, formations, consciousness and the rest of the links of dependent becoming. In a broader sense it is a vision of a reality, which is relational, conditioned and dynamic (Kalupahana, 1975; Garfield, 1995).

Atomic individualism is challenged in terms of ethics by Dependent Co-origination. As soon as creatures are beings who exist only insofar as the conditions are fulfilled, then the picture of the self that is independent and strives to realize purely personal interests is both philosophically erroneous and ethically harmful. Violence that is done to others bounces back via interdependence networks. It is not self-sacrifice that is practiced from outside and made intelligible through compassion, but rather an act of compassion as a reaction to the truth of the interconnectedness of lives.

Dependent Co-origination specifies the reason why ignorance is a moral issue as well. Ignorance is not simply the lack of knowledge: it is a basic false consciousness of the essence of reality. The need to create a sense of craving, aversion, fear, and domination to understand the things as permanent, independent and really existing. Cognitive distortion is thus associated with the failure of ethics. Wisdom is important in terms of morality since having a better view of reality modifies ways of responding to others. Interdependence reveals vulnerability, conditioning each other, and the unreality of clinging to the ego (Gowans, 2015; Williams, 2009).

2.5. Impermanence, Moral Seriousness

Very closely related to the doctrine of Dependent Co-origination is the doctrine of impermanence (*anicca*). Everything that is conditioned comes into being and dies. Bodies get old, social relations are altered, objects are corrupted and even minds are in constant flux. In the case of Buddhism, impermanence is not a metaphysical fact, but a fact that has to do with existence and ethics. Holding on to the unstable as if it were permanent brings about suffering (Rahula, 1974).

Moral practice is urgent because of impermanence. Life is delicate and unpredictable; this is why you should not postpone the development of virtue, mindfulness and wisdom. It is also a challenge to possessiveness. Status, wealth and power cannot offer safe grounds of selfhood. Compassion can increase when impermanence is highly perceived as all beings are perceived as frail and vulnerable to loss. In this way, the doctrine will be able to make pride softer, less attached, and make people more solidary with each other.

Meanwhile, impermanence is protection against despair. Bad habits are not inborn personalities, but can be changed. Suffering is a conditioned thing and as such can be stopped. An immutable nature does not impose a moral judgment on the moral self. Buddhist ethics is optimistic since it presupposes that the aspects of greed, hatred and delusion are not absolute and can be undermined through training.

2.6. Non-Self and the Issue of Personal Identity

A fundamental concept of Buddhism is the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) that has become a controversial subject of Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha denied the existence of a self or soul that experience is based on and is eternal and never-changing. Rather, the individual is broken down into five aggregates which are form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness. None of these aggregates is enduring, autonomous and adequate to be considered a significant self. A person is a contingent process and not a permanent metaphysical entity which we refer to as a person (Collins, 1982; Siderits, 2003). This analysis is recorded in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59), in which the four aggregates form, feeling, perception, and formation and consciousness are looked at and dismissed as a permanent self (Bodhi, 2000).

Brings an ethical issue at once. In case of a lack of a permanent self, to whom is the moral responsibility attributed? Who does, who suffers and who is set free? The Buddhist philosophers are answering this by a differentiation between conventional and ultimate truth. Traditionally, individuals are the causal continuous processes of physical and mental events. They decide, recollect, will, endure and strive towards freedom. But in the end analysis shows that these processes do not have any immutable essence. Responsibility thus is a matter of continuity with no identity in the strong metaphysical sense (Siderits, 2003).

Non-self is not a threat to ethics but rather can enhance it. Egoistic attachment assumes the overestimation of self, ego and mine. Once this obsession is diminished, the delimiting lines between self-concern and concern for others are no longer so hard. Less possessiveness and more sensitivity to common vulnerability can result in ethical action. However, non-self does not necessarily bring about virtuousness. It should be combined with strict moral training and reflective thinking.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative research approach and a text philosophical research design are used in this study. It does not engage in any kind of survey or experimental study as the focus of the research is on the conceptual coherence of moral responsibility in Buddhist thought. The key data sources include key documents and interpretations from academics. The conceptual analysis and close reading of text are used to discover how the texts utilize the concepts of intention, non-self, continuity, wisdom, compassion and liberation.

3.2. Sources and Scope

The main texts are the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (DN 4) which teaches the purification of ethics and wisdom, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (SN 56.11) which expounds on suffering and the path, the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59) on the five aggregates and non self, and the *Nibbedhika Sutta* (AN 6.63) on intention and kamma. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is selectively looked at and explored concerning the *Mahāyāna* extension of compassion. The secondary sources are restricted to published, academic works which focus primarily on Buddhist ethics, personal identity, moral psychology and application to the present. The study does not pretend to be comprehensive in its scope of all Buddhist schools or historical eras.

3.3. Analytical Procedure

A three-stage analysis was carried out. Firstly, the set of writings was read and statements regarding the moral agent, intention, causal continuity, ethical cultivation and compassion were identified. Second, these concepts were put in comparison with the major scholarly interpretations of Buddhist ethics as a virtue ethics, a consequentialism or a liberation oriented approach. Thirdly, the interpretation that resulted was tested and used with the selected texts and also the current issues which are already discussed in the manuscript. Authoritative translations and comparison with other texts are used to enhance the reliability of interpretation. The conclusions are philosophical statements that are based on the evidence in the text and are not claims about all Buddhist communities.

4. Discussion of Findings

The result of the analysis was five findings, which are all related to each other. First, a conversation about Buddhist ethics is transformative

insofar as it has to do with cultivating intention, character and perception. This second point is that wisdom and morality are not independent, but supportive of each other. Third, non-self is crucial to end the notion of a permanent soul and maintain responsibility via causal and conventional continuum. Fourth, wisdom is directed towards both moral and ethical development by the power of compassion, which moves beyond a selfish perfection of the self. Fifth, the whole framework is not covered by virtue ethics and/or consequentialism, but by intention and discipline, and character and consequences and liberation.

4.1. Buddhist Ethics as Transformative Moral Philosophy

Among the most productive approaches to conceptualizing Buddhist ethics is viewing it as an act of transformation as opposed to something prohibitive. The moral prohibitions of Buddhism, whether in the form of moral commandments of the layperson (Five Precepts) or much more rigorous monastic commandments, are part of a bigger program of character and consciousness transformation. It is not merely to shun bad kamma but to eradicate the mental states that render bad kamma attractive or customary (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2001).

This focus is what makes Buddhist ethics seem to be differentiated from moral systems having a sole limit to the duty or law. It is not. What shall I do? But what is the sort of person I am becoming by this thought, Word, and action? The moral agent is gradually transformed by the practice of generosity, compassion, patience, mindfulness, and wisdom, which are practiced repeatedly. Similarly, unhealthy habits like resentment, greed, envy, and delusion become habitual and tend to become habitual patterns of bondage.

It is through this that Buddhist ethics has a high pedagogical aspect. Training tools are called precepts. Meditation cleanses concentration and unveils the sources of response. The moral thoughts can instruct us in choosing what is healthy and unhealthy in our minds. The concept of liberation is not that of an abrupt external forgiveness, but of a gradual cleansing of the mind and behavior. In this respect, ethics can not be separated from moral psychology and spiritual anthropology.

4.2. Wisdom and Morality in Dependence on Each Other

One of the unique strengths of Buddhist thinking is that it does not segregate wisdom and morality. Ethical behavior is stabilized and enriched by moral behavior, which helps to focus and stay clear. An unstable mind, which is dishonest, violent, or drunk, is ill placed to be able to perceive things clearly. On the other hand, an individual who has a deeper insight into impermanence, non-self, and interdependence is less inclined to cling, dominate and harm (Nāṇamoli & Bodhi, 1995; Bodhi, 2000).

Such a relationship is most evident in the form of the Eightfold Path. Right view and right intention are a part of wisdom whereas right speech, right action, and right livelihood are part of ethical conduct. But they are not stand-alone tracks. The intention to the right already has moral content: intentions of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness turn the practitioner towards the kind action. Equally, ethical behavior guards the mind against guilt and anxiety, hence helping to focus and achieve wisdom.

The interdependence of wisdom and morality is also the reason why Buddhist ethics cannot be easily categorized according to the

conventional Western categories. When ethics cannot be separated from the knowledge that is liberation oriented, moral theory is not self-contained but a part of a larger picture of reality and of human flourishing. Buddhist ethics is not the ethics of controlling social life but of changing the way in which reality is perceived and lived. In fact, as expressed in the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta* (DN 4), wisdom purified by moral deeds and moral deeds purified by wisdom, neither of which is complete without the other (Walshe, 1995).

4.3. Virtue Ethics or Buddhist Ethics

The most famous argument presented by Damien Keown (1992/ 2001) is that Buddhist ethics can be understood as a type of virtue ethics. This school of thought focuses on the development of character, the primacy of the virtues and the pursuit of a supreme human good, nirvana, which is similar to eudaimonia in Aristotelian ethics in some ways. There is much to recommend this view. The Buddhist religion attaches a lot of importance to the qualities of compassion, patience, generosity, truthfulness and equanimity as being stable. Moral development entails growing into a particular type of human being, and not simply an action of doing isolated things.

Further, disciplined habituation cannot exist without the concept of moral excellence in Buddhism. It is through practicing truthfulness that one becomes truthful; practicing generosity becomes a generous person, practicing perseverance without hatred and in the end he becomes patient. In that regard Buddhist ethics is more like virtue ethics as opposed to deontology, which emphasizes following rules or consequentialism where emphasis is laid on outcomes.

There are limits to the virtue ethics interpretation, however. Buddhist ethics is not only interested in thriving in the common human experience, but its endpoint is enlightenment. It thus attaches greater emphasis as compared to most virtue theories, to renunciation, non-attachment and deconstruction of self-centered desire. The Buddhist saint is not merely a healthy citizen but she is the one who has radically changed the cognitive and affective causes of suffering. Therefore, although virtue speech is enlightening, Buddhist ethics is deeper than virtue ethics (Gowans, 2015).

4.4. Are Buddhist Ethics Consequentialist?

Charles Goodman (2009) believes that at least certain threads of Buddhist ethics can be construed as consequentialist, at least insofar as the moral agent is guided by compassion in the minimization of suffering and the maximization of the welfare of sentient beings. This reading is truly explanatory. The damaging or positive consequences of actions are frequently touched upon in Buddhist literature. Compassion appears to be consequential in nature, as care is to care about what befalls them.

Mahāyāna versions of consequentialism are particularly convincing when the Bodhisattva ideal is seen as a way of justifying the flexibility of moral judgment in the interest of a more compassionate end. There are even some texts that contain the hardest cases when some harmful actions are done with kind intentions to avoid more suffering. These instances imply that rule-absolutism is not reflective of the intricacy of Buddhist moral thinking (Jenkins, 2010; Goodman, 2009).

But consequentialism is not enough. The ethics of Buddhism do not judge what actions should be based on the outside results. Motive

is still paramount and acts done out of greed or hatred are ethically corrupt despite the incidental positive consequences. In addition, the fact that Buddhists care about karmic and psychological development implies that the way an action affects the agent is of the utmost importance. It all depends on consequences, character, mental roots, as well as liberating insight. Buddhist ethics is thus more enriching and pluralistic than regular consequentialism.

4.5. Moral Responsibility and Non-Self Reconsidered

The connection between non-self and responsibility is one of the most philosophically thought-provoking problems of Buddhist ethics. Western moral philosophy tends to assume that accountability involves having a stable self that exists throughout time. This assumption is questioned by Buddhism. The person is neither an eternal soul nor a mere illusion in the sense of nothingness. Instead, it is a traditional real and yet non-substantial continuum of aggregates and causal processes (Collins, 1982; Siderits, 2003).

Causal continuity is the way that this framework maintains moral responsibility. Current becoming depends on the present individual, which is a heritage of past behavior, personalities, and recollections as well as karmic inclinations, which determine future becoming. The intelligibility of responsibility is consequent in the absence of metaphysical substance. Indeed, the Buddhist model might prove to be closer to lived experience than hard conceptions of identity as human beings are continuously evolving yet are stable enough to hold themselves accountable.

Non-self has radical implications when it comes to ethics. It contradicts the possessive self-concern and exposes that the suffering

of others is just as much an issue of concern as one's own self, simply due to the conventional distinction between them and me (Śāntideva, 1995). It is among the best philosophical pillars of universal compassion in any moral tradition.

Nonetheless, Buddhist ethics do not fall into the impersonal abstraction. The feeling of compassion is extended to the real suffering of beings that are conventionally real. Rejection of an ultimate self does not imply that one is indifferent to persons. Instead of that, it simply implies that individuals are dynamic, relational and more vulnerable than solitary metaphysical atoms.

4.6. The Heart of Buddhist Ethics: Compassion

The Buddhist moral life revolves around compassion (*karuṇā*). It is among the four immeasurables, the others being loving-kindness, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Compassion is the reaction to suffering with the desire that this suffering should be reduced. Buddhist ethics does not believe that compassion is just sentimentality. It is disciplined, informed and associated with wisdom. True compassion is not possessive or one that strengthens egoistic identity by the need to be seen as good (Harvey, 2000; Williams, 2009).

The value of compassion is a natural result of the Buddhist diagnosis of being. When everyone is captivated more or less in a cycle of misery created by ignorance and desire, then a clear-eyed person is not allowed to be ethically apathetic. The practical manifestation of the understanding of common vulnerability is compassion. It is also used as a counter to brutality, rage and self-centeredness.

Wisdom is, however, to direct compassion. The uninformed sympathy may turn out to be paternal, emotional, or ethically bewildered. Buddhist practices thus dictate the need to balance the acts of compassion with discernment and equanimity. Wisdom is observant of causes and conditions: compassion reacts to them. The ethical ideal of the awakened man is comprised of them. An intellectual wisdom that is devoid of compassion would be spiritually deficient, whereas compassion that is devoid of understanding may be a source of unintentional harm.

4.7. The Bodhisattva Ideal and Mahāyāna Moral Expansion

The Bodhisattva ideal is a concept that develops the ethical value of compassion in Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Bodhisattva does not just want to awaken to liberate him/herself but to liberate all beings. This ideal extends Buddhist ethics past a personal journey towards liberation and it makes the spiritual path a universal responsibility undertaking (Williams, 2009; Goodman, 2009).

This is particularly the case with the Bodhicarya Vataṛa by Santideva. It introduces the nurturing of bodhicitta, the awakened mind of compassion as the basis of the moral life. Perfections that the Bodhisattva engages in to ensure that self-transformation and service to others are generosity, ethical discipline, patience, effort, meditation and wisdom (Śāntideva, 1995). The aim of leading a moral life is a long-term struggle to overcome self-cherishing by the interest in all sentient beings.

The Bodhisattva ideal has spawned many philosophical arguments. Critics say that its requirements are too stringent or self-denying. Some hold that it contains one of the broadest conceptions of

moral concern in world philosophy. However one thinks that it clearly indicates that Buddhist ethics can transcend the minimal non-harm and be active, courageous and even sacrificial compassion. It makes morals not merely repressive, but a constructive devotion towards the well-being of others.

4.8. Rules, Moral Flexibility and Precepts

Despite the fact that Buddhist ethics is said to be non-dogmatic or therapeutic, it would be erroneous to think that it does not have a normative structure. Precepts matter greatly. The Five Precepts, which include not killing, not stealing, not committing sexual misconduct, not using false speech and intoxicants, are some of the foundations of lay life as a Buddhist. Rules are more detailed among monastics, and a lot of traditions are detailed as to virtues and prohibitions (Harvey, 2000; Keown, 2005).

However, the Buddhist precepts have a different role in function than the divine commandments in theistic traditions. They are the training rules that are aimed at character development and the minimization of suffering. Their power is not so much in the will of the lawgiver but rather in the causal order of the way. One will not kill because killing will feed cruelty, fear and *kamma* but not because it is prohibited.

Simultaneously, the Buddhist traditions have been arguing about the degree of exceptions allowed by rules. Mahāyāna writings seem to be more permissive than the early Buddhist sources of morally disturbing actions on exceptional compassionate grounds. This has prompted scholars to investigate the question of whether Buddhist ethics can be skillful in a way that goes beyond literal rule-following.

The flexibility and the risks that come with context-sensitive ethics are brought out by such discussions. Compassionate justification can very easily be rationalized unless wisely kept in check by humility and self-examination.

5. Discussion

5.1. Contemporary Moral Questions

They indicate that Buddhist moral responsibility is best understood as a relational and developmental responsibility. No new research themes are presented as stand-alone research topics in the following discussion. Rather, it asks if the framework of intention, causal continuity, wisdom and compassion that it has identified would provide a way to illuminate selected contemporary problems. The applications are consequently only philosophical implications of the textual results and are not an overview of the field of applied Buddhist ethics.

5.2. Buddhist Ethics and Violence

Peace is a theme that has been linked to Buddhist teaching and there is significant textual and doctrinal support for this association. Buddhism has been depicted as a peaceful religion with a lot of textual and doctrinal grounds to associate with it. The first precept is against killing and the nurturing of loving-kindness is the direct opposite of violence. The initial Buddhist beliefs constantly criticize hatred and laud patience, self-control and compassion (Fronsdal, 2005; Harvey, 2000).

Nevertheless, the historical communities of Buddhists have not necessarily been living up to these ideals. At times Buddhist rulers, monks and movements have been in favour of war, nationalism and forced violence. Recent academia has demonstrated that Buddhism as well as other religious traditions can be harnessed to help in a political

conflict (Jerryson, 2010). This is what adds the complexity of history to Buddhist ethics, yet it demands critical honesty. Power, fear and ideology cannot distort any tradition.

On the philosophical side, the anti-violent inclination of Buddhism is still high. Violence is usually due to hatred, delusion or affiliation with self and group identity. It brings about misery to victims as well as ethical harm to attackers. Buddhist ethics tends to view violence as spiritually serious and morally poisonous even in those instances when hard cases of defense are under consideration. One of the most obvious and long-lasting contributions to world ethics is the presumption against harm as one of the most significant contributions of Buddhist thought.

5.3. Engaged Buddhism and Social Responsibilities

One of the main criticisms of Buddhism is that it emphasizes personal liberation and less on structural suffering. Contemporary socially engaged Buddhism movements are reacting to this issue by implementing Buddhist teachings in regard to poverty, racism, war, economic injustice, and political oppression (Queen, 2000; King, 2009). These movements claim that compassion and interdependence do not simply focus on the individual mind but on society as a whole that generates suffering.

Engaged Buddhism may be regarded as a logical extension of fundamental teachings. Dependent Co-origination teaches that suffering is caused and conditioned by various factors, most of which are social, institutional and economic. When exploitation, militarism and environmental destruction are some of the conditions of suffering, Buddhist ethics cannot tolerate them. When based on mindfulness and

non-hatred, social action becomes one of the paths and is not a distraction from it.

This trend expands the range of Buddhist ethics and its peculiar focus on inner change. The mindless activism may recreate the anger and domination; mindless meditation may turn into complacency. Engaged Buddhism aims to maintain these dimensions in unity through the combination of contemplation, ethical practice and compassionate action in society.

5.4 Environmental Ethics

The Buddhist philosophy provides a great pool of sources for ecological ethics. The dependency origination weakens the illusion of the separateness of humans from nature. Nature is not just a stage on which human wants play their game but it is one of the strands of the change that makes life. Avarice-based consumption, environmental exploitation, and lack of concern towards non-human suffering seem to be ethically flawed according to a Buddhist perspective as it is caused by ignorance and increases suffering (Kaza, 2000; Sahni, 2008).

Non-attachment, contentment and simplicity are particularly virtues that are applicable in the age of ecological crisis. Buddhist ethics does not simply instruct them to be concerned about nature but rather it is an analysis of the cravings and habits that contribute to the destruction of the environment. Consumerism is based on the fantasy that fulfillment can be achieved by piling up. Buddhism has a problem with that illusion, revealing the instability of lust and the price of infinite acquisition.

Meanwhile, the Buddhist environmental ethics should not be romantic. Industrial capitalism and climate change did not prompt

classical Buddhist works to be written. Interpretation and extension are thus needed to make them relevant today. Nevertheless, interdependence, compassion, restraint and respect for life give strong principles to form ecological responsibility.

5.5 End-of-Life Care/Bioethics

Buddhist ethics have also led to the debate on bioethics, particularly abortion, euthanasia, palliative care, and the moral status of consciousness. Since Buddhism puts a heavy emphasis on non-harm and intent, morality in medicine is commonly considered with great care to the motive, the outcomes and the state of mind of both the patient and the caregiver (Keown, 2001; McCormick, 2013).

It is common in end-of-life care to emphasize having a calm and clear mind at death as a Buddhist tradition. This can render aggressive sedation or euthanasia an ethically challenging area, as such alleviation of pain can be incompatible with maintenance of awareness. Meanwhile, the pity of the suffering that is unbearable is also heavy in moral terms. Buddhist ethics is thus not simple to provide answers to. It promotes context-specific thinking that is informed by non-harm, compassion, mindfulness and respect for the process of dying.

This method is useful in modern bioethics as it does not submit to either extreme legalism or to models of choice that are based solely on individualistic views. It not only inquiries about what is legally acceptable but also what will help us stay wise, dignified, non-harming, and compassionate in the presence of mortality.

5.6 Social Injustice and Systemic Abuse

Social justice issues have been more and more put into discussion with Buddhist ethics. Racism, caste discrimination, poverty and political domination are not just outside issue, it is a construction of the mental and material states of suffering. When the question is whether ethics aims at alleviating suffering, structural injustice has to be a morally pertinent question (King, 2009; Queen, 2000).

Two insights, particularly valuable, are provided by Buddhism. It demonstrates, first, that laws and institutions are not the only ways in which systems of injustice are perpetuated but also greed, fear, delusion and identity attachment. Second, it warns about righteous activism being itself becoming enslaved to hatred or ego. A Buddhist form of social justice is thus an integration of critical structural consciousness and practices of mindfulness, compassion and non-reactivity.

There is a tendency among those against Buddhism to fear that its focus on inner transformation may end up shifting the political action focus to an urgent one. This risk is real. But the finest of practising Buddhism demonstrates that meditation can enhance moral commitment rather than diminishing it. Practicing Buddhism can contribute to more long-term and competent justice initiatives by decreasing hate and reactivity.

5.7 Ethics of Speech in the Contemporary World

One of the aspects of Buddhist ethics that is most applicable today is right speech. Truthful, beneficial, well-timed and kind speech. Buddhist doctrine about verbal communication has an important place in the digital era of communication, conflict, propaganda and misinformation. The misery introduced by lies and divisive speech is not only content-

related but also related to the development of habits of aggression and negligence (Bodhi, 2000; Fronsdal, 2005).

Buddhism's ethics of speaking do not stipulate that one should not speak out against injustice. Instead, it inquires whether or not speech is based on understanding and compassion. Kindness should not be cruelty and cruelty should not be kindness. The perfect one is the honest, non-hurtful speech, the critical, not the hateful one, the firm, not the vindictive speech. This kind of model is in particular useful in polarised societies where communication tends to be a source of domination or self-exhibition.

5.8 Moral Psychology Continuing Relevance of Buddhist Dhamma

Possibly, the greatest legacies of Buddhist ethics in modern philosophy are moral psychology. The Buddhist literature has delicate discussions of craving, anger, resentment, pride, envy, compassion, attention and self-deception. They do not think of ethics as the externality of behavior but as the development of mental practices and the perceptual systems (Flanagan, 2011; Goodman, 2002).

This emphasis is well-loved in the contemporary issues of habit formation, emotional regulation, trauma, consumerism, and identity. Buddhist ethics imply that sustainable moral change goes beyond proper principles; it involves training attention, reforming the desire and awareness of the narratives in which the self is created and justified. It thus has a fusion of philosophical ethics, psychology and contemplative practice in a manner that is extremely relevant today.

6. Conclusion

A coherent and in-depth explanation of the human situation is offered by both Buddhist philosophy and ethics. Starting with the reality of misery, Buddhist theory forms an ethical vision based on the cause and effect relationship, moral psychology, interdependence, and whether one can be liberated or not. Its teachings about impermanence, Dependent Co-origination, kamma, and non-self are not esoteric metaphysical riddles; they determine the ways of moral life interpretation and practice.

This essay has maintained that Buddhist ethics is best described as a transformative moral philosophy. It does not make morality a set of commands, consequences and virtues that are isolated, though it has the elements of each one of those. Instead, it incorporates precepts, intentions, character and consequences in a way that has the ultimate goal of the end of suffering and the development of wisdom and compassion. Self-transformation is thus implicated in the ethical life in Buddhism.

The doctrine of non-self, instead of abolishing the moral responsibility, simply shifts it to causal continuity, not to metaphysical substance. Far, far better than the sentimental extravagance of compassion, compassion turns out to be the wise exercise of an understanding of interdependence and mutual vulnerability. The Bodhisattva ideal goes one step further to enlarge the definition of Buddhist morality by offering the moral life as an active involvement towards the well-being of every life.

The modern relevance of Buddhist ethics is also very impressive. Its resources are eloquent about violence and ecological

crisis, social injustice, end-of-life care and the ethics of speech. In both instances, the origins of suffering found in craving, ignorance and inflexible self-identification are highlighted in Buddhist philosophy, as well as practices of restraint, mindfulness, wisdom and compassion are provided.

This study shows that Buddhist 'moral responsibility' is not based on a permanent self, nor is it annulled by the message of non-self. It is based on the causal continuity of intentional and cultivated processes at the conventional level of persons. Wisdom is the appropriate antidote to the wrongfulness of self-reification, and compassion is the appropriate antidote to the wrongfulness of the tendency to the ethical detachment of wisdom. Within one single account, this integrated explanation is given of how responsibility, self-transformation and concern for others can be coherent without a substantialist philosophy.

Finally, Buddhist thought and morals are persistent since they never allow the separation of the truth and transformation. Already to perceive reality correctly is to embark on altering one's way of life. Acting ethically is to be involved in liberation. Buddhist moral thought provides, in a fractured world, not just a theory of the good life, but a training regime that helps to become less harmful, more enlightened and kinder.

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