Is There a Buddhist Ethic for the Modern World?

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THE LINE OF THOUGHT presented here had its predecessors in two previous articles. The first, "Motivated Goodness and Unmotivated Perfection in Buddhist Ethics" (*Anglican Theological Review*, LXXI:2, 1989), noted that in Buddhism, both Theravada and Mahayana, the attainment of perfection, i.e. ultimate salvation or enlightenment, is achieved only when the ordinary motivations to good ethical conduct are transcended. In Theravada, to perform some action with a definite goal or result in mind, is inherently tainted with samsaric impurities; for to desire "moral goodness" or aim at "good results," even though better than intending moral evil and bad results, is still ineradicably poisoned with attachment to this present world, with desire for limited time-space "goods." In Mahayana such desires and actions confirm one in self-righteousness and embody self-powered (*jiriki*) goodness (Jōdo Buddhism), essentially rejecting Amida's conditionless other-powered (*tariki*) salvation. For Zen, moralistic righteousness results in setting up false right/wrong, good/evil dichotomies.

The second article, "Buddhist Self-World Theory and Buddhist Ethics" (*Eastern Buddhist*, XXII No. 2, Autumn 1989), observes that in both Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism the portrayal of the individual self and its world as fundamentally transient and irreal has consistently led to a downgrading of concrete efforts to "better" the present world order, in the daunting knowledge that samsaric entities (self, world) can never be essentially or permanently improved. Thus Buddhism has on the whole been socially passive. There have been partial exceptions to this, notably Asoka. Experiencing a revulsion of feeling at the bloodshed occasioned by his conquest of Orissa, he embraced Buddhism as an individual and sought to embody some of its principles in his statecraft thereafter. He became the model for

kingship in those Southeast Asian countries touched by Buddhism, where sovereigns liked to think of themselves as Buddhist "universal" monarchs—though perhaps more in apocalyptic-political than in genuine Buddhist terms. In Tibet and Mongolia monkish-ecclesiastical social and political orders were set up. And numerous Chinese and Japanese rulers considered themselves Buddhist in a personal sense and favored Buddhist establishments with lavish largesse—in the hope of favorably influencing superhuman potencies of Buddhist persuasion.

But in the main Buddhism, as ecclesiastically organized and as individual faith and practice, has been socially and politically passive. Its method of evangelism, in keeping with its doctrine of nonviolence, has been that of adaptation to the social patterns of the lands into which it has spread. It has sought to change individuals rather than social patterns and institutions directly, to permeate the original social values with its own, and to pervasively modify the existent social order rather than challenging it directly.

The question being raised here then is this: Given these fundamental perceptions of social realities and the proper way to deal with them—the recognition of the impossibility of fundamentally improving the samsaric world, the impermanence and unreality of the individual qua individual, the salvation-impeding nature of *all* action geared to samsaric goals—how can Buddhism of whatever lineage speak to the modern world and its concerns?

The question being raised here is *not* that of the ultimate truth or superiority of Buddhist individual and social ethical standards or of the truth/falsity of its teachings, but of the probable (possible?) effectiveness of traditional Buddhist ethic(s) to deal with ethical dilemmas and situations in the present world order-disorder of affairs. For the modern world is very much of a samsarically oriented world. It is concerned about such matters as hunger and deprivation, disease and health, situations of social inequality and injustice affecting the national and racial groups and classes, and the sexes. Certainly the cries which resound through the world today—calls for equality of opportunity, human rights, freedom from discrimination and oppression, the dignity of the individual and the like—very obviously have to do almost entirely with matters of samsaric impermanence which are traditionally of secondary or even tertiary importance for Buddhism. In the past such ills and inequalities have been attributed to the karmic results

of previous lives, to be patiently borne as one's just desert, and meliorated by the realization that this present time-space world is not fully real.

To many these traditional Buddhist "solutions" to such problems, and Buddhist responses to modern socio-political situations, seem decreasingly relevant to what is going on even in traditionally Buddhist cultures. And the question cannot but intrude itself: Does Buddhism, which in past centuries showed itself marvelously adaptive to widely differing cultures and civilizations (Indian, Central Asian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese) possess the capacity to respond to the modern "Westernized" world with its own meaningful ethical norms? In the following, several of the "weaknesses" and "strengths" of Buddhism, as perceived by the author, will be listed and briefly discussed. There will be here, inevitably, some blurring of distinctions between various Buddhist sectarian traditions, but the main emphasis will be on the central Buddhist viewpoints as far as possible.

Liabilities of Buddhism in Dealing with the Current World Ethical Concerns

1. *Transcendent eternalism*

As suggested earlier there is in Buddhism a general downgrading of the temporal-spatial world order in its scale of values. This order is often, so to speak, conceived to be a figment of the unenlightened misunderstanding of reality somewhat like the ordinary three-dimensional perception of time and space compared to post-Einsteinian space-time multidimensional "reality." Nirvana or the Void is the only and ultimate Real. Dynamic historical currents and events are discounted and devalued, especially in some branches of Mahayana. The seemingly irreversible temporal order is a product of our unenlightened perception, nothing more; "history" has no real meaning, historical progression is reversible (or nonexistent), and of course historical goals are ephemeral irrealities. Such pervasive perceptions result in a pervasive discounting of socio-political, historical-economic concerns and attempted solutions to their "problems."

2. *Unsalvability of the space-time order (samsāra)*

Both in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism attempts to change and radically improve contemporary socio-political orders—to "right"

perceived "wrongs," to strive for justice in place of injustice and the like—are seen as writing on the water. Or they are the efforts of the (bodhisattvic) bird to put out a raging forest fire by dropping beakfuls of water on it. While perhaps only orthodox Marxists and some fundamentalists in several Western religious traditions cherish the hope of a permanent "fix" of the world's problems by imminent divine intervention or historical forces, most of the world's peoples cherish some hope of more or less permanently ending such "wrongs" as slavery and ethnic oppression, wiping out some diseases, and the like—or at least greatly reducing them. Buddhism with its general a- or anti-historical instincts does not (cannot?) add much strength to such efforts.

3. *Philosophically "idealistic" rather than "realistic"*

Somewhat parallel to this, especially in Mahayana, is the tendency toward a kind of philosophic idealism which seems to regard mental states or entities as the prime realities. Whatever its true inner interpretation this is what the world at large hears from it at any rate. "Inner" mental-spiritual states are more real-important than "outer-physical" states and factors. And conjointly with this general position of emphasis on the key inwardness of reality, is the organic inclusion of the individual entity (also "self") in the wholeness of reality. In the Hua-yen statement of this principle the atom is integral to the whole Buddha-nature-universe, and conversely the whole universe is "in" the atom—just as in a hall of mirrors every mirror reflects every other mirror.

This tends to the downgrading of the individual in importance and reality. Quite some years ago in conversation with the late Nishitani Keiji I dissented somewhat from his use of a favorite Buddhist simile of the wave and the ocean: the wave (individual) is formed momentarily on the ocean's surface (the universe), is totally composed of ocean water, and sinks back into it without loss. I protested that the wave did lose its individual form and identity when it subsided again into its ocean base, that some value was lost here. In reply he gave me a one-line Zen put-down: "Your thinking is too wave-like, not enough ocean-like." The metaphysics of this aside (see later), it points to the reductiveness of the significance of the individual person on this scale of values. The question then becomes: Will this play significantly on

a world stage where the value of the individual is increasingly emphasized—at least in public statements?

A further important illustration of this: From the Buddhist (especially Mahayana) perspective, religions and humanistic doctrines that stress the overriding importance of the individual human being are criticized for being "homocentric" in their view of the universe. There is certainly something to be said for this objection, as will be noted later. But when it is said in Buddhist counterbalance that all forms of sentient being (sometimes even plants and stones!) are of equal "value" or "worth" with human beings, and when Christopher Ives in his unpublished doctoral thesis (*A Zen Buddhist Social Ethic*) writes that viral entities are of equal "value" and "worth" with *all* other beings, some hard practical questions will be asked in the contemporary world: Should we not kill disease-bearing insects and rodents? If it is a human life—that of one's own child for example—versus an animal life, would Buddhism not have us interfere? Ives does suggest that there are sometimes "practical" limitations on the application of the doctrine of universally equal value, but no valid ethical principle apparently in opposition to it.

4. *Evil is a matter of perspective*

The pervasive Mahayana (especially Zen) view of enlightenment is twofold: One must be enlightened oneself (an ages-long process, Zen perhaps excepted) before one can work effectively for other-person and world improvement; and true enlightenment will bring the realization that perhaps the world does not need improvement after all, or that the real improvement must be wrought in one's own view of the world. In Zen the radical change wrought by enlightenment is to behold the old ordinary (evil) world as newly glorious with Buddha-splendor. Thus Hakuin the eighteenth-century Zen master wrote: "The Buddha Amitayus is brilliantly manifest here and now . . . All kinds of hell-suffering . . . are nothing but Amitayus Buddha's whole body that shines with the color of burnished gold."[1] That is, the "cure" for the world's ills is to see them less rigidly defined than in our usual categories of good/evil, right/wrong, pleasant/unpleasant, but all somehow subsumed/included in the Cosmic Buddha.

[1] "Sokkōroku-kaien-fusetsu," Sec. 30, *Hakuin-oshō-zenshū*, Vol. II, pp. 403–4, tr. Tokiwa Gishin.

5. The doctrine of karmically determined rebirth—till the achievement of enlightenment—is almost universally held to be true, except perhaps among some avant-garde Zen Buddhists. This is a belief—aside from its dubious believability for the non-Buddhist world—that will scarcely commend Buddhist ethics to that same world. Historically the doctrine of karma has tended toward social determinism and passivity, providing a "sanctification" of the status quo. It is today often urged that it is a doctrine of hope; it offers the possibility of improving one's earthly lot—the *next* time around—but only very limitedly in this present life. But that scarcely interests the majority of the inhabitants of the modern world.

6. Women have been persistently downgraded in Buddhism from the very beginning, with only occasional exceptions. Of course Buddhism is not alone among religions in feminine subordination; Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam have also rather consistently practiced it—and Christianity at least has been taking its lumps from modern feminists. But in none of these has woman's subordination been so early and so flatly stated, and so fully institutionalized as in Buddhism. Gautama Buddha is portrayed in the Pali Canon as having forced Ananda to press him three times to secure the admittance of women to the order of nuns. And joined with this was his dire prediction that as a result his Dharma would endure in its purity for only 500 years. And in Theravada countries generally a nun of many years must bow in deference and subservience to the merest shaveling monk of one day's ordination. So too in most Buddhist sects it is taught that before a woman can attain enlightenment she must gain birth as a male. And even in Zen, in many ways the least tradition-bound of all Buddhisms, the head of a monastery is always male. While Islam seems to be experiencing a revival of "fundamentalism" which keeps women encased in their all-concealing robes and behind the veil, in most of the rest of the world male dominance is being increasingly challenged.

Related to this is the Buddhist view of sexual morality. There is a wide range of teaching and practice here ranging from complete abstinence of sexual activity, either hetero- or homosexual, on the part of Theravada monks and nuns, to considerable Tantric liberty on the part of some Tibetan monks; among some of them, "come West," this has meant nearly promiscuous sexual indulgence for the spiritual

(male) head of meditative groups under his direction. Nor has this been absent among "imported" Zen masters loosed from Japanese Zen monastic traditions, and American converts. Richard Baker, erstwhile Zen *rōshi*, asserts that in Japan, the meditators are interested only in the master's "role as a teacher. If the teacher can be an agent for his enlightenment, he can drink or womanize or whatever. In Japan, if a person has the energy of four or five people, he's allowed to have four or five lives, five houses, five wives, whatever comes with the territory of that energy."

He goes on to say, "We don't have that feeling. We're anti-intellectual [!] and we want to make everything [everyone's morality?] alike."[2] Whether one accepts Baker's analysis of some Zen masters' behavior or not, it *is* quite true that in the world outside Japan and Tibet things *are* different and Buddhism needs to have some stated principles of sexual conduct.

7. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Buddhism seems to have no really solid base for self-worth values so much prized in today's world, and for championing human rights. In Theravada the "self" is held to be a fabric of illusory experiences, not a true reality; it is only a succession of body-mind linked moments that changes every split second. (I once had an ardent Buddhist convert suddenly ask me, "Who are you?" I began some sort of answer and he stopped me in mid-sentence saying, "You have already changed a thousand times even before you started to answer.") And indeed how *can* a "no-self" have any "rights" except ephemeral samsaric ones of evanescent samsaric character, conferred by an equally ephemeral socio-political order?

Besides there is the prospect of another rebirth which is more important than anything which may happen or be secured in this present life. But curiously Buddhism, especially Theravada, by virtue of this factor has a strong "self"-doctrine, fully as strong in its way or even stronger than much self-doctrine in the West. This is belief in the "karmic self," which though embodied in an ephemeral samsaric-"self" form, carries a new existence, in the form of the character-result of past lives, into a new existence ad infinitum. (In Burma at least this is often perceived as the inheritance of biological and personal characteristics.)

[2] *Zen in America*, Helen Tworkov, North Point Press, San Francisco, 1989, p. 249.

But *this* type of "permanent" selfhood does not conduce to human "rights" because its only true reality is essentially impersonal karmic continuity-reality and its only worth its salvational (nirvanic) potentiality. In Mahayana there is the assertion of the presence of the Buddha-nature (reality, potentiality) in every human being (and in sentient being, tree, and rock in some versions) which *logically* ought to give high value to each individual it would seem. Yet because here too the individuality of each individual person (and sometimes "thing") is a passing feature of this present moment of temporal existence, the maintenance of its individualistic dignity is not of first importance.

Of course in the early periods of the Christian West the next, eternal world was considered to be the only true and important one and the present life and its conditions only of instrumental, not intrinsic, significance. But even so the Christian (or Muslim for that matter) had only his/her present life in which to determine eternal destiny; hence in its eternal-instrumental quality this present life was of supreme significance, not merely one more stage in an infinitely long succession of stages. And with the advent of the humanistic Renaissance this present world and life were valued for their innate qualities, not just as instrumental to the next life. Thus in the modern Western world, with its disbelief in the immortal soul, this present space-time world and one's present limited (samsaric) life in it, are the basic realities. One's present life, samsarically limited though it be, is the only life there is, to be made the most and best of. Unconsiciously drawing from the rejected Christian belief in the soul, and joining with it Greek-humanist Renaissance-Enlightenment values, "modern Western man" passionately defends the inherent dignity, worth, and rights of individual men. And much of the non-Buddhist world has at least in its public pronouncements, tacitly accepted this valuation of humanity.

This is the world mind-set with which Buddhist ethics must deal. What then can it, must it, say of convincing ethical interest to such a samsarically, individualistically-ethically oriented world?

Positive Factors

The foregoing comments may seem to suggest that there is little or nothing in the Buddhist traditions which may relevantly and persuasively speak to "modern" ethical concerns and valuations. This is scarcely

the case but it *is* time for Buddhism to find a "new" voice in such matters, a voice which is more than a call to retreat from a deep concern with the samsaric world into private, detached "eternalistic" peace and psychic balance. It must reinterpret its basic ethical values to deal with modern concerns about justice, political and humanistic values, and individual dignity and worth. Perhaps Buddhism may find that it has as yet unrealized capacities for such adjustment. The following items, from an outsider viewpoint, seem to me to be possibilities, as yet unrealized Buddhist strengths.

1. *Organic relation of man and universe*

The sense of this relationship has been, and remains, singularly weak in Western oriented cultures. There it is rather that of 100% exploitation for the sake of man. This attitude without doubt sprang in part from the Judeo-Christian heritage of man's supreme worth in God's eyes: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over . . . every living thing" (Genesis 1:28 R.S.V.)— a mandate being feverishly fulfilled by a resource-devouring civilization and burgeoning world population.

From the beginning Buddhism has had a different viewpoint. Humankind has been perceived as integrally related to the natural and subhuman orders of being. Karmic continuity in Theravada teaching extends from animal, through spirit, human and divine beings to Buddhahood without essential break. In Mahayana, man's dependence on and organic oneness with the natural order—from vegetation to cosmic Buddhahood—is central, reaching its apex perhaps in Hua-yen where, as in the previously noted hall-of-mirrors analogy, every being is one with Cosmos, and the reverse. To realize the individual's oneness with, and permeation by, Cosmos—to be bone of its bone, flesh of its flesh—does not truly diminish human worth but enhances it.

In this era of tardily rising environmental concern there is surely place and need for a Buddhist witness and activity on the conservationist front and a reversal of the excessive, homocentric atomism which now governs the world. Not only so but its sense of organic interconnection is of course not limited to the human-natural relationships, but applies to the inter-human communal relationships and is needed as a counterbalance to the sheer aggressive individualism that characterizes Western-style culture. Surely Buddhism can (and should)

emphasize the interrelatedness of all men in this era of increasingly tribal loyalties.

2. *All-embracing compassion*

The Judaic, Christian, and Islamic views of human relationships—intermingled with Hellenic theory and Roman practice—have produced a somewhat strict legal moralism, emphasizing rightness and virtue, the role of judgmental ethical conscience in human affairs. The non-judgmental ideal of the Buddhist bodhisattvic wisdom and compassion, which views human character and actions on an elastic and non-judgmental basis, and extends non-judgmental compassion to "saint" and "sinner" alike, violates strict legalistic definitions and seems (to many in the West) to dissolve all standards, and perhaps practices, of good and bad, right and wrong and lead to a total ethical relativism. But this is an inaccurate stereotyping of Mahayana Buddhism, taken usually out of context. Buddhist compassion as a legalistic moderative influence is a needed counterbalance. Buddhism needs to develop this theme concretely in modern contexts.

3. *Non-conceptual visceral awareness*

The Zen emphasis on non-intellectualized, non-conceptual awareness, a selfhood built on visceral foundations has an important contribution to make to modern living. In a mechanized, superficially intellectualized cultural atmosphere it is easy, indeed almost inevitable, to build a self-hood and life-style upon foundations which are not truly one's own, a character and pattern of life conformed to tight conceptual frameworks and practiced in terms of external categories. This Zen "freedom" must not be interpreted, however as a sheer cry for totally individualistic freedom in something of a repeat of its very earliest (Kerouac et al.) patterns. American society at least is in need of the exercise of responsible, socially aware freedom.

4. *A reconciling nonviolence*

Buddhism has a long and relatively consistent tradition and record of benevolent nonviolence. True there have been some anomalies in Buddhist history: Sri Lankan monks urging on the sovereign to kill the invading, attacking forces from mainland India, since they were beasts or demons, not men; Zen Buddhism as the religion of the samurai warrior and the Pure Land (Jōdo) militant Ikkō sect of sixteenth century

Japan, etc. But these aberrations are mild and few when compared to the wholehearted espousal of wars—holy wars—and crusades by almost every other major religious faith in the world.

The actions of Thich Nhat Hahn, the Zen Vietnamese monk who mounted an extensive "enemy-of-neither-combatant" campaign by Buddhists to help, if possible, ameliorate the evils of the bitter Vietnamese War that crippled the country for a generation to come in its pursuit of delusive political goals, is a fine example of Buddhist "social action" replacing its agelong social passivity. It might well make common cause with some well-chosen Gandhian nonviolent protests of the present day against social ills, work with Quakers for reconciliation, etc. all quite within its ancient tradition of benevolence.

5. *Compassion/wisdom reinterpreted and restructured*

It may be that Buddhist compassion needs to be reinterpreted and restructured in its relation to wisdom. As observed earlier these two between them tend to produce socio-political passivity. It should be said that the Buddhist wisdom-guided scepticism as to the likelihood of the achievement of that perfect world of the Marxist-secular, the evolutionary-perfectionist, Christian-humanist—and for that matter Maitreyan or Christian millennial Kingdoms of Peace and Perfection—is well justified. But the question remains: Should this then result in social passivity, in concentrating on rescuing individuals into eternal world-forgetting, world-discounting calm? Should wisdom paralyze compassion? If so Buddhism has little of interest to say to the most of the world today.

Perhaps Buddhism should reexamine the worth of those beakfuls of water. No, they will never put out all the fires of pain, dissatisfaction, wrong, injustice that blaze in the world today—or in any day. And few, except the above noted perfectionists of one sort or another, expect that they will. For the historical process is one of ongoing imbalances, a kind of lurching from one set of "solutions" or rectification of wrongs or construction of a more just social order, on to another. It is always repeating itself as factors change; it is something of a Sisyphean task. But are not these things worth doing, these bird-beakfuls of water worth continuing? Surely some such things as human slavery should be outlawed; surely there are other rank inequalities and inhumanities of which each generation and epoch has its new variety—

but which must be countered.

Have words such as oppression, cruelty, torture, inhumanity no real meaning? Surely the words of the sixth century B.C.E. Hebrew prophet Micah, "And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and love kindness?," have lost neither meaning nor importance. Surely Buddhist compassion has depth and variety enough to learn to express itself in new and more active ways!

6. *Personal transformation and social action*

There is a pervasive strand of Buddhist teaching to the effect that only after enlightenment can a person truly benefit his fellows. The rider of the wild ox of his own untamed self, when he has trained and tamed the ox enters into the abode of butchers and prostitutes with "bliss-[healing-]bestowing hands." This would seem to deny true fellow-human helpfulness to all but perfected "saints." Or, in Pure Land terms, one must first attain birth in the Pure Land Paradise of Amida and then return in a *future* rebirth to help his fellows

This teaching, as well as the wisdom-compassion relationship, needs a new translation. Perhaps it can be put in terms of the importance of a deeply grounded religious awareness for the balance and success of social-reform efforts. Though it may not appeal much to many with the present activist temperament—those looking hungrily around for *some* cause to espouse, for whom means and ends are often governed by considerations of expediency and immediate effectiveness, and to whom failure brings despair—it would ground such efforts much more securely and give a true balance to them. It is such religiously grounded (in the generic sense of fundamentally depth-anchored) motivations which tend to carry on despite any discouragement.

Conclusion

A summary question may now be asked: Can Buddhism effectively neutralize its weaknesses vis-à-vis the modern world and become a valuable and effective ethical force? There are indeed some signs of such development apparent as Buddhism has moved out of its traditional Asian domain into the wider world in various forms and diverse modes—scholarly study by Westerners, interreligious interchanges, the establishment of Buddhist enclaves in Europe and the Americas, and the growth of a considerable interest in the practice of various modes

of Buddhist meditation.

Nor has this interreligious contact been a one-way missionary street. Just as Buddhism in its travels from India to mid-Asian to East Asian countries was greatly modified and showed itself to be a master-adaptor, so too it is being affected by its contacts with and presence in the West. One strand of Theravada meditational teaching reaches out to Western young people in terms of their Western-style lives. A Thai Buddhist, Sulak Sivaraksa, has been notably active in addressing current social problems in his own country (often at personal risk) and made common cause with some non-Buddhist groups to advance humanitarian causes. In the United States some Zen leaders have made an especially vigorous effort to deal with current social problems and ethical values, linking the Zen meditative discipline with active social concerns and dealing with contemporary ethical problems. Whatever the net result of these particular efforts, they demonstrate that it *is* possible for Buddhism to shake off its age-old social passivity and emerge as a significant ethical force in the West—itself changing markedly in the process.