

# Buddhist Self-World Theory and Buddhist Ethics

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## 1. *Buddhist Perceptions of Selfhood*

The dominant perception and imaging of the human self and its relation to its enviroing world play a pervasive and determinative role in any ethical system and its enveloping culture. This is no less true of Buddhist and Buddhist-modified cultures than of any others; perhaps it is even more so, in fact, because of the central importance which self-views have in Buddhism.

The immediate fact to be faced, of course, is the classic Pali Canon assertion—foundational to Theravada traditions, and strongly influential in the Mahayana viewpoints—that there is no “self” in its ordinary sense and experience. The outlines of this assertion are familiar. The individual “self” is actually only a very temporary collection of four visceral-psychic and one physical-formful factor (*skandhas*).<sup>1</sup> They are mutually dependent in their arising and continuing association in the “Self.” There is no abiding “self” present either among or in the totality of the five factors.

Their ongoing name and form of “personal” character is like an incessantly moving-changing stream of rapidly succeeding mental-physical items and moments of existence, flowing within the bounds of seeming identity. Any given moment or state of formful existence is but a link or stage, neither totally different nor exactly the same as its successor or predecessor. These “personal” streams go on in their largely independent courses, worlds without beginning or end, with

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<sup>1</sup> For the most part the more familiar Sanskrit terms will be used even though referring to them in a Pali context (e.g. *skandhas* for *khandas*, *Nirvana* for *Nibbāna*).

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their succeeding embodiments varying according to the moral quality of previous actions (*karma*). But whether more or less fortunate, their innate character is impermanence (*anicca*), substanceless irreality (*anātma*), and hence innately dis-ease and intrinsic suffering (*dukkha*).<sup>2</sup> And the self's environing world order is of the same sort—chains of ever-changing, causally determined states of elements characterized by heat (fire), solidity (earth), motion (air), and cohesion (water).

The Mahayana version of human selfhood is a modification of the Pali Canon view rather than a radically varying account. Or perhaps one should speak of the varied Mahayana statements about the self, since there are several of them. However it may rather generally be said that with very few exceptions (Jōdo and Nichiren?) all the versions show the influence of Taoist and Confucian perceptions of selfhood. The Chinese cosmos is perceived as an ongoing organic process rather than a somewhat mechanically conceived set of causal chains (including those of living beings) which move forward in eternal lockstep side by side from an infinite past into an infinite future as in the Pali canon. In this Mahayanist organic world the human individual is in *all* aspects an intrinsic part of it, a cell within it, which lives, moves, and has its being therein. Here it is difficult to distinguish the "mental" from the "physical" aspects of selfhood; these two aspects are continuously intermingling and overlapping in their self-internal activities and in self's relation to the universe.

Resultingly the self in Mahayana has a somewhat more intimate and positive relation to the cosmic process than in the Pali canon view. There the presence of self in its universe is an ineluctable imprisonment, so to speak; in Mahayana it is an intimate involvement. Perhaps Hua-yen and Zen best manifest this quality. In Hua-yen the universe is "in" the individual entity—selves included—and the individual entity is "in" the universe. The famous parable of Fa Tsang in which each

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Conze wrote regarding the Pali Canon. "description" of the self:

The formula is manifestly intended as a guide to meditation and not as a basis for speculation. (*Buddhist Thought in India*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1962, p. 37)

With this I agree, but 1. Theravada Buddhists tend to take it quite literally, and 2. the ethical result is much the same in either case.

mirror in the hall reflects the central Buddha image<sup>1</sup> as well as every other mirror, including every other mirror's reflection of itself, is the Hua-yen picture of this state of universal mutual implication and reciprocal containment. One particle's movement affects the whole, and vice versa. In Zen we have the formless self, a non-self selfhood, which tangibly expresses the eternally formless and yet ever-forming Formlessness which is the ultimately real. From it flow (are constituted) the emptiness of forms (including the self) and into it they dissolve, for "form is emptiness and emptiness is form."

It is obvious that Buddhist self and Buddhist world, whether in the Pali Canon or Mahayanist perspective, are inextricably linked. The self views entail their accompanying world views, and the respective world views tend to "produce" their accompanying self views in true symbiosis. And it would seem to follow that any significant change in either would result in change for the other. As will be observed later this situation has an important bearing on Buddhist ethics.

## 2. *The Summum Bonum and its Attainment*

The Supreme Good or Value in an ethical tradition, if it can be defined, determines the nature of the total ethical structure in the final analysis. In the case of Buddhism it is perhaps better to speak of its existential *optimum desideratum* whose intrinsic nature necessitates a specific moral-mental discipline for its attainment, rather than of its supreme ethical goodness. And as to this there can be no doubt in Buddhism: its name is Nirvana. All of the approved, the "good" modes of conduct and inner attitude, tend toward this final goal. Indeed they are to be esteemed as "good" precisely because they do so tend. All other "goods" are only good-for, approved for leading to presumed but false benefits, and distractive of the total devotion necessary to attain to the Supreme Good.

The term "Nirvana" contains in its basic linguistic meaning the essence of its religious and ethical significance also. It portrays a "going out" as of a flame, a "going out" from the present order of existence, i.e. time-space embodiment as a "self," or radically transcending its time-space limitations of being. It is a final, definitive

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of the central Buddha image is of course the Buddha nature that is (in) everything.

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escape from embodied individuality and its limitations. In classic Pali Canon terms it is the utter end of the heretofore endless sequence of deaths and rebirths, the samsāric existence which is intrinsically and irremediably impermanent, empty of substantial reality, and full of suffering. In a word the Summum Bonum, or Optimum Desideratum in Buddhism is total escape from “selfhood” and its (“self”-created?) world.

The essence of this escape—which can be accomplished while still embodied, as demonstrated by the Buddha and the arhat—is that of overcoming the illusion of integral selfhood and the consequent snuffing (or starving) out of the urgencies of greed and hatred, and the delusions that make one a slave of one’s environing world. This requires a mental-emotional-moral discipline which demolishes, both conceptually and existentially-viscerally, the sense of unique, integral self-being, a seeing of oneself as one “really is”—a loosely joined series of mental-physical states. And simultaneously the world of loved and detested entities becomes a matter of indifference as a result of the escape from the “self”-delusion; for escape from “self” entails escape from “self’s” world.

This Nirvanic mind-set, as perceived in the Pali Canon tradition has been described thus:

Just as a rock of one solid mass remains unshaken by the wind, even so neither visible forms, nor sounds, nor odours, nor tastes, nor bodily impressions, neither the desired nor the undesired, can cause such an one to waver. Steadfast is his mind, gained is his deliverance.<sup>4</sup>

In the Mahayana context the terminology and flavor of the intellectual and visceral “escape” into Nirvana are of course significantly different, though again, as always, a modification rather than reversal of the Pali Canon interpretation. In a phrase we might say that in Mahayana the salvational escape is not *out* of but *into* the self and its symbiotically related universe, at a deeper level.

This has been expressed in several differing but actually melding or harmonious ways. There is the general Mahayana sense of finding Nir-

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<sup>4</sup> *Buddhist Dictionary*, Nyanatiloka. Colombo: Frewin and Co., Third rev. ed., 1972, under “Nibbāna”.

vana to be somehow within or identical with samsāra; it is not precisely that samsāra is to be reformed into Nirvana by human effort but re-perceived as essentially Nirvanic at the same time. And one cannot but be aware here of the permeative effect of what de Groot called Chinese "universism." After the death of Chuang Tzu's wife his disciples were astounded to find him beating on a pan and singing. In answer to their questions he acknowledged that he *had* felt grief upon the death of his companion of many years and the mother of his children. At the same time he could not but be aware of the larger and fundamental meaning of her life and death: the Universe had lent her human form for a time and was now taking her back into the glorious greatness and harmony of the ongoing Cosmic Process. One also remembers the story of the three old men gleefully speculating on what form their individual substances would take when they next emerged from the all embracing Wholeness—perhaps a cricket, a bat's wing, or some such thing.

Then there was also the Confucian Heaven-ordered universe with its inherent moral order, the "silent beauty of the moral law" as Confucius termed it—and its all-inclusive nature which was transformed by Buddhism into the all-inclusive Buddha-Nature of the ultimately real. This Chinese "universism" also appears in the favorite Mahayana metaphor of the wave of individuality, momentarily differentiated from its Mother Ocean, then becoming "ocean" again. Thus it is both the "same" and "different" (the same *because* it is different?—so D.T. Suzuki), the living model of "form is nothingness and nothingness is form," the Buddha (freed, nirvanic) nature in everyone waiting only to be recognized, and lastly the molecule-cosmos mutual implication of Hua-yen.

"Liberation" or "Nirvanic attainment" then in Mahayana, generally speaking, has the quality of re-perceiving the universe and our relation to it. One acknowledges one's unity with it beneath the seeming divisions and dualities which mark the ordinarily experienced world, indeed finds unity and diversity indissolubly intermingling, each necessary to and fused with the other. When this awareness is achieved, then in Hakuin's words we have a totally new universe:

Master Caozi (Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch)'s old mirror has both heaven and hell, pure land and defiled one, reflected in

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it, but they are none other than the monk's single eye. . . . None of them has anything to do with going and coming, or birth or death. . . . 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 purplish burnished gold. . . . Awakened beings see it as the Land of the Light of eternal tranquillity.<sup>5</sup>

Thus we might epitomize the Pali Canon view of the liberated saint as one who walks among his fellow men (or lives in a monastery with other liberation-seeking individuals) open-eyed and totally disabused of the illusion that the world about him has anything of worth to offer him, serene and at peace in his detachment. The liberated Mahayana saint is likewise free from enslavement by the sheer visibilities and tangibilities of his world; but, by a deeper penetration into its true essence, beholds it *sub specie aeternitatis* as the all-inclusive nature of the Buddha.

Obviously these represent the elitist version of Buddhist practice. In the Pali Canon-observant Theravada tradition this, a saint's version of Buddhist salvation, has become the ideal for the monkish community. For Mahayana it is the High Bodhisattvic road of Wisdom whose vision can pierce through the gross evils and suffering in the world to its essential Buddha Nature, likewise achieved by the very few. These are the paths and communities of spiritual specialists who intensively follow the paths of meditative discipline.

What is there in this for rest of the world, for fellow Buddhists who<sup>6</sup> remain in the ordinary samsāric world, of necessity dealing with it somewhat in its own (delusional) terms? These also cherish the hope of liberation from samsāra's thrall and the evil spell of their own false selfhood, but at a great, great distance, many lives hence. What have

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<sup>5</sup> "Sokkōroku-kaien-fusetsu", Section 30, p. 86f. in *Hakuin-oshō-zenshū*, Vol. 2, pp. 403-4. Translated by Tokiwa Gishin.

<sup>6</sup> Monkish prejudice against the lower-level layman as not a true part of the *sangha* still exists. Heinz Bechert (*Buddhismus: Staat und Gesellschaft in den Ländern des Theravada Buddhismus*, Frankfurt: Alfred Metzner Verlag, 1966, Vol. I, p. 67) quotes a Sri Lankan monk thus: "The religion of Buddha consists of only three elements, of Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha. By the laws of Buddha, the laity form no part of religion."

these basic world views for the ethical guidance of the great Buddhist communities of lay persons (and the world) in the way of life-guiding principles? And what effect have the basic self-world views had upon the societies that Buddhism has permeated or strongly influenced?

*The Basic Buddhist Ethical Pattern:  
Embodiment of Common Societal Values*

At the level of the ordinary Theravada lay community the basic pattern set forth as "Buddhist" actually embodies the ethical norms found in most of the world's societies. It is contained in the Five Precepts which enjoin the avoidance of taking life, taking another's possessions, of speaking falsehoods, of promiscuous sexuality, and use of intoxicants which cause outrageous behavior. Such standards seem necessary for the minimal functioning of almost any social grouping. They are of course generally observed by Mahayana Buddhists as well, with minor variations.

There is one aspect of these basic standards which is distinctively Buddhist. The prohibition of life-taking is ideally extended to all forms of sentient life, human and animal, halting a little this side of the Jain prohibition of the destruction of even the plant-root life. In actuality there are frequent evasions of this standard even in strongly Buddhist communities<sup>7</sup>; nevertheless it has had an important influence upon their dominant ethos.

*The Lay-Buddhist Ethical Ideal*

One might say generally that the lay Buddhist ideal ethic is a best-possible imitation or mirroring of the saintly enlightenment-level ethic in so far as the layperson tries to maximize the Five precept morality, or even go somewhat beyond it in a truly Buddhist manner. Two passages will set forth that Buddhist moreness.

The Pali Canon ideal mode of the saint's relation to others, the arhat-minded practice, is the perfection of the practice of the four illimitables, or divine abidings: loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karunā*), joy in the joy of others (*muditā*), climaxing in even-

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<sup>7</sup> The Burmese layman may not eat beef, but he often eats *gnapi*, or fish paste. The rationalization: Fish, upon being pulled out of the water are not killed, they simply die of themselves.

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mindedness or equanimity (*upekkhā*). These break down the distinctions between “self” and “other” and eradicate those of “better,” “equal,” and “worse” in thought and action. Such an one can now be “engaged in the practice of mercy and compassion for (all) living things.” This arhat-mind set abides in equanimity “regards . . . ‘self’ and ‘others’ with the same impartial eye, since the objects of all the Abidings are but ‘mental objects consisting in concepts.’ ”<sup>8</sup>

The imitation of this mode of conduct in lay life would seem to be impracticable in any direct manner. Perhaps the monkish sangha—with its non-competitive brotherhood of mutual concern—is the social ideal that *should* be followed in Buddhist lay society; but there seems to be small evidence that many (any?) Buddhist societies have even attempted to follow such a model. This may root in the origins of Buddhism as a non-worldly sect of Nirvana-seekers who in the course of time developed stable communities that needed lay support. It was initially considered very difficult, though not quite impossible, for the “householder” to attain deliverance, given his worldly cares.

In any case those suttas, as for instance the *Sigālovāda sutta*, which prescribe “Buddhist” rules of conduct (put into the mouth of the Buddha) go little beyond the general pattern of traditional Indian duties owed by those in each station of life to those above, those on a level, and those below oneself socially.

More meaningful is the bodhisattva pattern, which was later adopted with considerable éclat by Mahayana as the Buddhist Ideal of conduct. For the Pali Canon the bodhisattva is of course a Buddha-in-the-making in his ages-long career from the time of the initial vow to become a Buddha till its final achievement, which involves many human and animal rebirths. But the bodhisattvic qualities remain constant through all rebirths: wisdom, forbearance, generosity, loving-kindness, justice, faithfulness to given social station, self-, even life-sacrifice for others, and the like. And as the type of living which leads to Buddhahood in the end it can therefore be a model for the layman who is not yet able to embrace the monk’s quest for *immediate* enlightenment.

Mahayana picked up and then expanded the bodhisattvic pattern on a glorious scale, the highest possible ideal for conduct. One does not

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<sup>8</sup> *Selfless Persons*, Steven Collins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982, pp. 190-1.



selfishly and narrowly seek nirvanic release for oneself but resolves upon endless rebirths till *all* samsāra-bound beings shall be saved by one's efforts. Thus is compassion added to bodhisattvic wisdom. And Mahayanist writers were not loath to develop this theme. Śāntideva in his *Path of Light* wrote as follows:

I would faith become a soother of all sorrows of all creatures. May I be a balm to the sick, a healer and servitor, until sickness come never again; may I be an unfailing store for the poor, and serve them with manifold things for their need. My own being and my pleasures, all my righteousness in the past, present, and future [and impliedly all personal desire for Nirvana] I surrender indifferently that all creatures may win to their end.<sup>9</sup>

As thus portrayed the Mahayana Bodhisattvas *ethically* displace the Buddha, who is elevated to Cosmic Essence.

### *Resultant Ethical Values*

What then can be said to be the ethical results of the Buddhist perceptions of self, world, and the meaning of salvation? Perhaps the outstanding general characteristic is the predominant emphasis on the gentle, benevolent, self-sacrificing and altruistic virtues, with a conspicuous lack of emphasis upon the vigorous aggressive ones such as bravery, courage, honor, justice, and righteousness. And anyone who has lived for any length of time in a Buddhist-formed culture has been aware of a quality of gentle tolerance in individual behavior—though some of this no doubt is due to other cultural and to ethnic factors.

But what are the reasons for this generally “softer” ethical behavioral ideal? Of course, in general, the de-emphasis upon the individual self and its claims upon the world strikes a blow at the very root of most of the more “vigorous” ethical values, for many of them flow from the aggressive claims of the “self” to its goods, rights, and proper place in society. But this is not the depth of the matter; the real foundations lie deeper than this their manifestation.

We may note at least three factors here, all germane to the self-world

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<sup>9</sup> *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, James B. Pratt. New York: Macmillan, 1928, p. 219.

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views of Buddhism. The first to be noted is the Buddhist doctrine of the karmic-kinship linkage of all forms of life with each other, without exception. In the foundational Pali Canon view there can be no exclusively human pride-of-soul since “human beings” may become animals, ghosts, beings in hell, heavenly devas and vice versa—though only on the human level is there salvation. Hence a human being’s attitude should be a blend of profound gratefulness for present human status, and determination to retain such status through “good” Buddhist living. It should also generate a non-despising benevolence toward “lesser” forms of life.

In Mahayana the same linked-to-life quality is implicitly, though less explicitly, present. Though the doctrine of the implicit Buddhahood of all sentient, perhaps also non-sentient, beings (so Dōgen) *should* accord with the Pali Canon view, there is scant if any emphasis upon possible animal rebirths. Here the bodhisattvic compassion is to be extended primarily to all human beings, “saint” and “sinner” alike, since one may readily become the other.

There is a second aspect of karma which is of fundamental ethical significance here. In both Pali Canon and Mahayana Buddhism—though less rigorously in the latter—karma is Justice incarnate, functionally equivalent to Yahweh, God, and Allah in other religious contexts. The mills of karma may grind slowly but they grind with absolute moral fineness. Nothing escapes fine-tuned Karma—not the slightest thought, word, or deed—for either good or ill. Hence in the Buddhist world there is no pressing need for *human* enforcement of the standards of right and wrong, or the imposition of “just” punishments upon the wicked, and the rewarding of the righteous as in Christian and Muslim cultures, wherein the Almighty (out of necessity?) has appointed many human agents of His justice. Understandably the Buddhist is concerned with the possible pollution of Divine justice by human ignorance and malevolence.

The third factor here is the most subtle but the most important of all influences: the influence of the Buddhist view of self and world. The Pali Canon Buddhist perceives an illusory “self” living deludedly in a samsāric push-pull world which is largely the product of the “self” illusion. The Mahayana Buddhist perceives the individual human self living in a debasing separatist ignorance of his or her true self nature, which in reality is integrally enmeshed with the glorious wholeness of

**Reality.** In Pali Canon Buddhism the game of life is not worth the candle when played in samsāric terms; in Mahayana the Real Game is much more glorious than ordinary selfhood can imagine.

The resulting ethical situation is an oddly ambiguous one. For Buddhism, either Pali Canon or Mahayana variety, neither world nor self are what they seem to be. But in order to free the non-self from its self-delusion, to “save” the non-self to emancipation, its accompanying world must be down-valued or transvalued from what it seems to be. The importance of the world as it stands before the human being must be deflated (Pali Canon) or immanentized into a higher-self’s transformed awareness (Mahayana), so that ordinariness or ugliness become transcendent beauty (so Hakuin). The important upshot for ethics is that Buddhism thus refuses to deal with the world on its own terms. It has no mandate to save the world, only to save selves from themselves.

### *The Passive Buddhist Societal Role*

The societal-cultural results of this other-valued world and self view are familiar to all students of Buddhist influenced cultures. The first to be noted is the passive accommodative acceptance of the traditional cultural patterns into which Buddhism has been introduced. Or rather it would be more accurate to say that the preferred Buddhist mode of cultural change has been one of infiltration, adaptation, and modification rather than the aggressive and violent cultural changes enforced by Christianity and Islam in many cases. Buddhism has been marvellously adaptive. Native spirit religions have been gently assigned a secondary role; they are to be utilized in a fully samsāric manner to deal with the world as it seems to be—the world of sickness/health, poverty/riches, failure/success, sorrow/happiness. The Buddhist values are largely transcendent of these matters, having to do with far-off final release from such a world and some on-the-way-by amelioration of its ills. Thus do folk religion and Buddhism live side by side in Theravada and Mahayana lands, each performing its proper function for the Buddhist Layman.

Along with this and sometimes overlapping with it is the societal adaptiveness of Buddhism. That is, Buddhism has usually accepted the dominant forms of social organization in the countries it has penetrated. This means that male, family, clan, ethnic, and national

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dominance have been accepted almost as they stand; concern for individual and depressed-group freedoms and rights has been almost totally missing from the Buddhist message. Woman's subordination has been reinforced: *women* cannot become Buddhas. The reasons for this are not far to seek. One such factor is the Buddhist doctrine of karmic destiny; for while karma positively relates humankind (especially in Theravada Buddhism) to all sentient being as kin to it, by the same token each individual *deserves* his or her present status—male/female, rich/poor, healthy/diseased, fortunate/unfortunate and no one else can fundamentally change his or her lot. Thus a certain callousness to others' plights may exist side by side with a benevolent non-harmfulness of behavior.

The other basic reason is our main subject of interest here: the nature of Buddhist self. As we have seen there is no immortal soul of eternal worth, or unique rational-sensible individual whose freedom and social worth must be protected. There is only an evanescent set of mental-physical factors "deserving" its present existential situation or a Buddha-in-disguise whose present circumstances can be gloriously transfigured by an inner awakening which transforms its *present* world into a Buddha realm or Pure Land. All this can (and should?) be done without lifting a finger to change historical-social conditions. Of course no Buddhist would espouse precisely such sentiments; but this implicit logic of Buddhist self- and world-views subtly undercuts vigorous assertions of individual human worth at their root.

Finally, and quite naturally, due to this self-same self- and world-view, from the very beginning Buddhism has been loath to undertake governmental roles. For what have true Buddhists to do with political struggles for power, glory, and worldly dominion, with the building of dynasties and empires? Such concerns are the very quintessence of samsāric delusion and its un-Buddhistic pursuit. And besides all this there is the question of means; rulership, political power, and dominion are only achieved by the use of force, violence, and killing.

In stark contrast to Christian-righteous and Muslim-just rulers who have considered themselves divinely ordained to bring men to true rectitude and faith—even at the cost of their lives! Buddhist sovereigns have been uneasy with their role. King Aśoka repented himself, we are told, of the bloodshed by which he gained control of most of India and sought to be a benevolent ruler. Yet even he had perforce to keep his

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army and political power intact. Various “Buddhist” sovereigns in Southeast Asia following his model sought to atone for kingly-necessary violence by extensive pagoda building and “benevolent” rule.

In a modern case U Nu, as prime minister of Burma (1947–1958, 1960–62), who sought to achieve a “Buddhist socialism,” confessed to a friend that his duties as head of state—including that of encouraging his troops to fight the insurgents—were at odds with his personal efforts to achieve enlightenment. But he felt as a would-be bodhisattva that his state headship as a Buddhist was of some service to humanity (in the bodhisattvic mode) and that his leadership of the nation might serve as an example of “Buddhist” rule to the world. (The maximum advancement of his own enlightenment prospects would have to wait.) But it is obvious that the role of “Buddhist” statecraft is neither natural to Buddhism nor easy to define or fulfill. Be it repeated: The Buddhist mandate is not to “save” the world by “reforming” it but to enable the individual “self” to overcome it from within—for the world order is fundamentally unsaveable.

### *Conclusion*

Our conclusion must be in the form of a question: Whither Buddhist ethics in today’s world? It is a world in which personal-social concerns about individual and class rights and freedoms—those of the individual as such, of women, of ethnic and social-class groups—about justice, equal opportunity for social and economic status, and the environment, to name only a few, are clamorous realities. And these are all patently samsāric in nature, concerns of “unredeemed” samsāric individuality and its world. Can either world-deflating Pali Canon Buddhism, or world-immanentizing Mahayana, speak meaningfully to these concerns and issues out of their own traditional resources, or will some infusion of new values and perspectives from without be necessary? Surely this must be the paramount concern facing Buddhist ethics in the modern world. The socially passive-conformist patterns of traditionalist Asian societies of yesteryear will no longer serve Buddhism well.