Introduction

Buddhist ethics as a field of academic study in the West is not new, but in recent years has experienced a considerable expansion, as seen, for example, in the very successful Internet *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*. The schools of Buddhism have rich traditions of thought on ethics, though this is often scattered through a variety of works which also deal with other topics. This book aims to be an integrative over-view of ethics in the different Buddhist traditions, showing the strong continuities as well as divergencies between them. It seeks to do this in a way that addresses issues which are currently of concern in Western thought on ethics and society, so as to clarify the Buddhist perspective(s) on these and make Buddhist ethics more easily available to Western thinkers on these issues. In exploring Buddhist ethics, this work aims to look at what the scriptures and key thinkers have said as well as at how things work out in practice among Buddhists, whose adherence may be at various levels, and who naturally operate in a world in which their religion is only one of the factors that affect their behaviour. Even when Buddhists fall short of their ethical ideals, the way that they tend to do so itself tells one something about the way the religion functions as a living system.

Chapters 1–3 prepare the way for looking at ethical issues by exploring the framework of Buddhist ethics in terms of the foundations of ethics in Buddhism's world-view(s), and the key values which arise from this. While the ethical guidelines of different religions and philosophies have much in common, each is based on a certain view of the world and of human beings' place in it. Such a world-view gives particular emphases to the related ethical system, gives it a particular kind of rationale, and provides particular forms of motivation for acting in accord with it. A religion is more than beliefs and ethics, though, so its ethics also need to be understood in the context of its full range of practices.

The term 'ethics' is used in this work to cover:

(1) thought on the bases and justification of moral guidelines (normative ethics), and on the meaning of moral terms (meta-ethics);
(2) specific moral guidelines (applied ethics);
(3) how people actually behave (descriptive ethics).

David Little and Sumner Twiss, in their work on comparative religious ethics, have defined a 'moral' statement as one which addresses problems of co-operation among humans. It gives an 'action-guide' for individuals and groups so as to initiate, preserve or extend some form of co-operation, by guiding actions, character, emotions, attitudes etc. that impinge on this. Morality is 'other-regarding': focused on the effect of our actions etc. on others (1978: 28–9). While this is a reasonable view, it is an incomplete one for Buddhist morality, as this is also concerned with the quality of our interactions with non-human sentient beings too.

Moral 'action-guides' demand attention, though they sometimes conflict with each other – should one protect someone by lying to someone else? – and may conflict with religious action-guides, such as in the story of Abraham and the burning bush, where he is prepared to kill his son through faith in God. Actions done for purely prudential reasons – I do not want to go to jail, or to hell – are not really done from *ethical* considerations, though they may help form behavioural traits that are supportive of moral development. Religions sometimes use prudential considerations, for example karmic results, to help *motivate* actions benefiting others, without *justifying/validating* such actions on prudential, non-moral grounds. Broadly, religious-based ethical systems support ethics by motivating and justifying positive other-regarding actions and discouraging actions harmful to others, and strengthening the character-traits which foster moral action.

Little and Twiss regard a 'religious' statement as one that expresses acceptance of a set of beliefs, attitudes and practices based on a notion of a sacred source of values and guidance, that functions to resolve the 'ontological problems of interpretability' (1978: 56). That is, religion is focused on making sense of life, including suffering, death and evil, so as to help people understand, and resolve, the human predicament. Morality and ethics can exist apart from religion, for example in humanism or utilitarianism, or ethics can be integrated into a religious system. The same prescription, for example 'do not kill', may be justified by a purely ethical reason, for example this has a bad effect on the welfare of others, or a purely religious one, for example it is forbidden by God, or a mixture, for example it is forbidden by God because it harms others.

In a Buddhist context, the effect of actions on the welfare of others is itself a key consideration, as is the effect of an action on spiritual progress, and what the Buddha is seen as having said on it. Religions often move imperceptibly from ethical concerns, relating to material welfare of others, to more 'spiritual' ones such as self-discipline and renunciation, though these may, in turn, have ethical spin-offs.

The history of Buddhism spans almost 2,500 years from its origin in India with Siddhattha Gotama (Pali; Siddhārtha Gautama in Sanskrit; c. 480–400 BCE), through its spread to most parts of Asia and, in the twentieth century, to the West. While its fortunes have waxed and waned over the ages, over half of the present world population live in areas where Buddhism is, or has been, a dominant cultural force.

The English term 'Buddhism' correctly indicates that the religion is characterized by a devotion to 'the Buddha', 'Buddhas' or 'Buddhahood'. 'Buddha' is not, in fact, a proper name, but a descriptive title meaning 'Awakened One' or 'Enlightened One'. This implies that most people are seen, in a spiritual sense, as being asleep – unaware of how things really are. In addition to 'the Buddha' – i.e. the historical Buddha, Gotama, from its earliest times the Buddhist tradition has postulated other Buddhas who have lived on earth in distant past ages, or who will do so in the future. The Mahāyāna tradition also postulated the existence of many Buddhas currently existing in other parts of the universe. All such Buddhas, known as *sammā-sambuddha*s (Pali; Skt *samyak-sambuddha*s), or 'perfect fully Awakened Ones', are nevertheless seen as occurring only rarely within the vast and ancient cosmos. More common are those who are 'buddhas' in a lesser sense, who have awakened to the truth by practising in accordance with the guidance of a perfect Buddha such as Gotama.

In its long history, Buddhism has used a variety of teachings and means to help people first develop a calmer, more integrated and compassionate personality, and then 'wake up' from restricting delusions: delusions which cause attachment and thus suffering for an individual and those he or she interacts with. The guide for this process of transformation has been the *Dhamma* (Pali; Skt *Dharma*). This means the eternal truths and cosmic law-orderliness discovered by the Buddha(s), Buddhist teachings, the Buddhist path of practice, and the goal of Buddhism, the timeless *Nirvāṇa* (Skt; Pali *Nibbāna*). Buddhism thus essentially consists of understanding, practising and realizing *Dhamma*.

The most important bearers of the Buddhist tradition have been the monks and nuns who make up the Buddhist *Saṅgha* (Pali; Skt *Saṃgha*):

'Community' or 'Order'. From approximately a hundred years after the death of Gotama, certain differences arose in the *Saṅgha*, which gradually led to the development of a number of monastic fraternities, each following a slightly different monastic code (*Vinaya*), and to different schools of thought. All branches of the *Saṅgha* trace their ordination-line back to one or other of the early fraternities; but of the early schools of thought, only that which became known as the Theravāda has continued to this day. Its name indicates that it purports to follow the 'teaching' which is 'ancient' or 'primordial' (*thera*): that is, the Buddha's teaching. While it has not remained static, it has kept close to what we know of the early teachings of Buddhism, and preserved their emphasis on attaining liberation by one's own efforts, using the *Dhamma* as guide.

Around the beginning of the Christian era, a movement began which led to a new style of Buddhism known as the Mahāyāna, or 'Great Vehicle'. This has been more overtly innovative, so that for many centuries, Indian Mahāyānists continued to compose new scriptures. The Mahāyāna is characterized, on the one hand, by devotion to a number of holy saviour beings, and on the other by several sophisticated philosophies, developed by extending the implications of the earlier teachings. The saviour beings are both heavenly Buddhas and heavenly *Bodhisattva*s (Skt; Pali *Bodhisatta*), 'beings for enlightenment' who are near the end of the long *Bodhisattva* path – much elaborated and emphasized by the Mahāyāna – that leads to Buddhahood. In the course of time, in India and beyond, the Mahāyāna produced many schools of its own, such as Zen.

Our knowledge of the teachings of the Buddha is based on several canons of scripture, which derive from the early *Saṅgha*'s oral transmission of bodies of teachings agreed on at several councils. These canons gradually diverged as different floating oral traditions were drawn on, and systematizing texts peculiar to each school were added. The Theravādin 'Pali Canon', preserved in the Pali language, is the most complete extant early canon, and contains some of the earliest material. Most of its teachings are in fact the common property of all Buddhist schools, being simply the teachings which the Theravādins preserved from the early common stock. The Mahāyāna, though, added much to this stock. While parts of the Pali Canon clearly originated after the time of the Buddha, much must derive from his teachings. There is an overall harmony to the Canon, suggesting 'authorship' of its system of thought by one mind.

The early canons contain a section on *Vinaya*, or monastic discipline, and one on *Sutta*s (Pali; Skt *Sūtra*s), or 'discourses' of the Buddha, and some contain one on *Abhidhamma* (Pali; Skt *Abhidharma*), or 'further teachings', which systematizes the *Sutta*-teachings in the form of detailed analyses of human experience. The main teachings of Buddhism are contained in the *Sutta*s, which in the Pali Canon are divided into five *Nikāya*s or 'Collections', the first four (D., M., S., A.; sixteen volumes) generally being the older. The Pali Canon was one of the earliest to be written down, in Sri Lanka in around 80 BCE, after which little, if any, new material was added to it. The extensive non-canonical Pali literature includes additional *Abhidhamma* works, historical chronicles, and many volumes of commentaries. An extremely clear introduction to many points of Buddhist doctrine is the *Milindapañha* (*Miln.*), a first-century CE text which purports to record conversations between a Buddhist monk and Milinda (Menander; *c.* 155–130 BCE), a king of Greek ancestry.

Mahāyāna texts were composed from around the first century BCE, originating as written works in a hybrid form of the Indian prestige language, Sanskrit, rather than as oral compositions. While many are *Sūtra*s attributed to the Buddha, their form and content clearly show that they were later restatements and extensions of the Buddha's message. The main sources for our understanding of Mahāyāna teachings are the very extensive Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist Canons. While most of the Pali Canon has been translated into English, only selected texts from these have been translated into Western languages, though much progress is being made.

Of the above sources, *Vinaya* (*Vin.*) texts often include material relevant to ethics, both in the form of specific rules for monks and nuns and in the reasons given for these and mitigating factors for offences against them. Ethical material is scattered throughout the Theravāda *Sutta*s and Mahāyāna *Sūtra*s, with some particularly focusing on ethical matters. The *Abhidhamma* literature contains material on the psychology of ethics, and the commentaries of all traditions contain useful explications of moral points in the scriptures as well as stories with a moral message. One sees this particularly in the commentary to the *Jātaka*s, which expands on canonical verses about past lives of the Buddha to develop morality tales.

All traditions also have treatises by named authors which include ethical material. Of these, the following are particularly of note. In the Theravāda tradition, Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE) wrote the

Visuddhimagga (*Vism.*), whose ninth chapter contains some excellent material on lovingkindness and compassion. He also compiled many commentaries, which are often treatises in their own right. In the Sarvāstivāda tradition, an early school which has died out, is the compendious *Abhidharma-kośa-bhāṣyam* (*AKB.*) of Vasubandhu (fourth century CE), which influenced the Mahāyāna tradition. In the Mahāyāna tradition, the poet Śāntideva (seventh century CE) produced both the *Bodhi-caryāvatāra* (*Bca.*), an outline of the *Bodhisattva*-path with some inspiring material on compassion and patience, and the *Śikṣā-samuccaya* (*Ss.*), a compendium of quotations from Mahāyāna *Sūtra*s, often on ethical themes. Nāgārjuna (*c.* 150–250 CE) wrote the *Rāja-parikathā-ratnamālā* (*RPR.*) as advice to a king on how to rule compassionately, and Asaṅga (fourth or fifth century CE), in his *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, gives material on the ethics of the *Bodhisattva* (Tatz, 1986). Of course, contemporary Buddhists in Asia are also involved in ethical thought, action and innovation, as will be seen in the course of this book, and Buddhists in the West, whose numbers have grown steadily since the 1960s, are also participating in this process.

In reading Buddhist texts, stylistic features peculiar to them become apparent. The *Sutta*s contain chunks of material which are repeated several times in a story or analysis, as they originated as oral literature which found this mode of composition congenial. They also contain many numbered lists, such as the Four Noble Truths, the five hindrances, and the seven factors of awakening. These aided the memorizing of oral material as well as reflecting what seems to have been the Buddha's very analytical turn of mind, breaking things down into their components. While he sometimes explicitly showed how these factors then related to each other and to the purpose for which the list was made, this is sometimes only implicit, and has to be teased out.

While Buddhism is now only a minority religion within the borders of modern India, its spread beyond India means that it is currently found in three main cultural areas. These are those of: 'Southern Buddhism', where the Theravāda school is found, along with some elements incorporated from the Mahāyāna; 'Eastern Buddhism', where the Chinese transmission of Mahāyāna Buddhism is found, and the area of Tibetan culture, 'Northern Buddhism', which is the heir of late Indian Buddhism where the tantric or Mantrayāna version of the Mahāyāna is the dominant form. In recent years, it has become possible to start talking about 'Western' Buddhism, too, but this as yet has no overall cultural cohesion, as it is drawing on all the Asian Buddhist traditions, as well as innovating in certain ways.

The main countries of Southern Buddhism are Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand, along with Cambodia and Laos, where religion has suffered because of wars and Communism in recent decades. Northern Buddhism is found mainly in Tibet, now absorbed into the People's Republic of China, among Tibetan and Mongol people in the rest of north-west China, in Mongolia – recently free of Communism – in the small kingdom of Bhutan, alongside Hinduism in Nepal, and among Tibetan exiles living in India. Eastern Buddhism is mainly found in Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and Singapore, as well as in Communist China, Vietnam and North Korea. The world's Buddhist population (excluding Western and Asian Buddhists in the West) is roughly 495 million: 105 million Buddhists of the Southern tradition, 25 million of the Northern tradition, and perhaps 365 of the Eastern tradition, though it is difficult to give a figure for the number of 'Buddhists' of this tradition, particularly China, on account of traditional multi-religion allegiance and the current dominance of Communism in the People's Republic of China.

Buddhism's concentration on the essentials of spiritual development has meant that it has been able to co-exist with both other major religions and popular folk traditions which catered for people's desire for a variety of rituals. There has hardly ever been a 'wholly' Buddhist society, if this means a kind of religious one-party state. In the lands of Eastern Buddhism, Buddhism has co-existed with Confucianism, a semi-religious system of social philosophy which has had a strong influence on people's ethics in this area. Buddhism has been very good at adapting to different cultures while guarding its own somewhat fluid borders by a critical tolerance of other traditions. Its style has been to offer invitations to a number of levels of spiritual practice for those who have been ready to commit themselves.

CHAPTER 1

The shared foundations of Buddhist ethics

> Life is dear to all. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill. Whoever, seeking his own happiness, harms . . . beings, he gets no happiness hereafter. *Dhammapada* 130–1

Fundamental features of Buddhism's world-view relevant to ethics are the framework of karma and rebirth, accepted by all schools of Buddhism, with varying degrees of emphasis, and the Four Noble Truths, the highest teachings of early Buddhism and of the Theravāda school. In the Mahāyāna tradition, an increasing emphasis on compassion modified the earlier shared perspective in certain ways, as will be explored in chapter 3.

SOURCES OF GUIDANCE TO BUDDHISTS

In ethics as in other matters, Buddhists have three key sources of inspiration and guidance: the 'three treasures' or 'three refuges': the Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Saṅgha*. The Buddha is revered as (1) the 'rediscoverer' and teacher of liberating truths and (2) the embodiment of liberating qualities to be developed by others. In addition, in the Mahāyāna, heavenly Buddhas are looked to as contemporary sources of teaching and help. The *Dhamma* is the teachings of the Buddhas, the path to the Buddhist goal, and the various levels of realizations of this goal. The *Saṅgha* is the 'Community' of Noble Ones (Pali *ariya*s; Skt *ārya*s): advanced practitioners who have experienced something of this goal, being symbolized, on a more day-to-day level, by the Buddhist monastic *Saṅgha* (Harvey, 1990a: 176–9).

The *Dhamma*, in the sense of teachings attributed to the Buddha(s), is contained in voluminous texts preserved and studied by the monastic *Saṅgha*. The advice and guidance that monks and nuns offer to the laity are based on these texts, on their own experience of practising the Buddhist path, and on the oral and written tradition from earlier generations of monastics and, sometimes, lay practitioners. Lay people are under no strict *obligation* to do what monks or nuns advise, but rather *respect* for their qualities and way of life is the factor that will influence

them, depending on the degree of the lay person's own devotion to the Buddhist way.

A common source of material for popular sermons is the *Jātaka* collection, containing stories which purport to be of the previous lives of Gotama when he was a *Bodhisattva* (see Jones, 1979). They occur in the canonical collections of all the early schools, became popular subjects for Buddhist art by the third century BCE, and were also taken up in the Mahāyāna. The stories often function as morality tales, being full of heroes, heroines and villains. The form of a *Jātaka* is a prologue purporting to be about events in the Buddha's day, the story itself, about a past time, and then a brief epilogue which identifies the Buddha with the hero of the story, and certain disciples or relatives with others in it. In the stories of the past, Gotama is mostly human, but sometimes a god and sometimes a (talking) animal. In the case of the Theravādin *Jātaka* collection of 547 stories (see *J.*), the form in which we now have them consists of some verses, seen as canonical, set in a lengthy prose frame, which was compiled by a later commentator, probably in Sri Lanka. Many stories are also found in the commentary on the *Dhammapada* (*Dhp. A.*), dating from fifth-century CE Sri Lanka, which gives around fifty *Jātaka*s, plus other stories set at the time of the Buddha.

As regards the order of priority among sources relevant to resolving points of monastic discipline – and by extension, one could say matters relevant to lay ethical discipline – the fifth-century Theravādin commentator Buddhaghosa gives:

(1) scripture in the form of *Vinaya*, but it could be seen more widely for non-monastic matters;
(2) that which is 'in conformity with scripture';
(3) the commentarial tradition (*ācariyavāda*);
(4) personal opinion (*attanomati*), based on logic, intuition and inference independent of (1)–(3), but whose conclusions should be checked against them (*Vin. A.* 230).

Here Damien Keown comments that conscience is not irrelevant, but scripture is 'a check that one's own moral conscience is calibrated correctly', and that 'it is not the text itself that is important, but the fact that it is "in conformity with the nature of things"' (1995a: 16). Nevertheless, less scholastic monks than Buddhaghosa might put more emphasis on the living oral tradition and meditation-based insights. Mahāyānists would also take 'scripture' to include Mahāyāna texts not acceptable as authoritative to Buddhaghosa.

The teachings attributed to the Buddha(s) are seen as an authoritative

guide to the nature of reality and the best way to live, based on the vast, meditation-based knowledge of such spiritually 'awakened' beings. Such teachings are not to be simply *accepted*, though, but used, investigated and, as far as is possible for a particular individual, *confirmed* in experience. This emphasis on testing out the teachings is seen in the well-known *Kālāma* Sutta (*A.* I.188–93). Here, the Buddha advises the Kālāma people not to accept teachings simply through tradition, speculative reasoning, personal preferences, what one thinks *should* be true, or respect for a particular teacher. Rather:

> When you, O Kālāmas, know for yourselves: 'these states are unwholesome and blameworthy, they are condemned by the wise; these states, when accomplished and undertaken, conduce to harm and suffering', then indeed you should reject them. (p. 189)

Accordingly, the Buddha then gets them to agree that greed, hatred and delusion (*lobha*, *dosa* (Pali; Skt *dveṣa*), *moha*) are each states which are harmful to a person when they arise. Being overcome by any of them, he or she kills, steals, commits adultery, lies, and leads others to do likewise, so that he or she suffers for a long time (on account of the karmic results of his or her actions, in this life or beyond). The Kālāmas are then led to agree that the arising of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion is beneficial, without such bad consequent actions and results. Accordingly, these states can be seen to be wholesome, unblameworthy, praised by the wise and conducive to happiness, so that the Kālāmas should 'undertake and abide in them'.

Here, personal experience, checked out by reference to the guidance of wise people, is taken as the crucial test of what mental states, and consequent behaviour, to avoid or indulge in. Using this criterion is seen to put a high value on states of mind which are the opposite of greed, hatred and deluded unclarity or misorientation, for they can be seen to conduce to happiness rather than suffering. Moreover, it is suggested that people are trustworthy guides to the extent that they are free of greed etc., as seen in a passage on how there can be a reliable 'awakening to truth' (*M.* II.171–6). A lay person first assesses a monk for the presence of states of greed, hatred or delusion, which might lead to lying or bad spiritual advice. If he sees that the monk's mind is purified of these, he reposes trustful confidence (*saddhā*) in him. A series of activities then follows, each being 'of service' to the next: 'approaching', 'drawing close', 'lending ear', 'hearing *Dhamma*', 'remembering *Dhamma*', 'testing the meaning', 'reflection on and approval of *Dhamma*', 'desire-to-do',