1 Introduction

> What is good, what is bad? What is blameworthy, what is blameless? What should be practiced, what should not be practiced? What, when done, leads to my lasting harm and suffering, and what, when done, leads to my lasting welfare and happiness?
> (Bodhi 2015: 140).

These searching questions recur in several different places in the Buddha's sermons as recorded in some of the earliest scriptures of Buddhism. In one instance, the Buddha enjoins a young man to ask these questions of wise people wherever he may find them to help him discover what is important about action and its effects (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2001: 1057). In another context, this time of a king wondering how to rule justly and well, the king is urged to ask these same questions of his wise advisors (Walshe 1995: 397). In yet another place in the scriptures, the same list of questions had been asked by the Buddha himself during his own long journey toward spiritual awakening (Walshe 1995: 449). In each case, these inquiries into the good and the blameless, on how we should live and what our practices should be, and finally, how to achieve welfare and happiness, can be taken to be the beginnings of Buddhist inquiries into moral philosophy. This Element takes up these questions by close study of the writings of two of Buddhism's most significant moral thinkers, Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva. Both engage in systematic explorations of the Buddha's teachings and how an ideal Buddhist life should be carried out. But they belong to quite different periods and traditions in the intellectual world of ancient India. Buddhaghosa (fifth century CE) was the foremost commentator on the scriptures of the Theravada tradition and wrote a lengthy account of the moral and religious life called the *Path of Purification* that has been highly influential in the Theravada tradition to this day; originally from India, he headed a team of scholars in Sri Lanka. Śāntideva (seventh to eighth century CE) was a Mahayana thinker based at Nālandā University in Bihar and wrote two works that survive, *Training Anthology* and *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, that went on to become highly influential in Tibetan schools of Buddhism. Though their visions overlap in some respects, they differ substantially in both the nature of the moral vision they offer and their styles of moral inquiry into it. By reading them together we can begin to discern something of the complexity and texture of Indian Buddhist thinking about fundamental moral questions of human life.

1.1 Comparative Philosophy and Questions of Approach

Although ordinary English speakers sometimes blur the lines between ethics and morality, it is helpful to distinguish what is meant by these two terms for the

sake of philosophical precision and to help us engage in the cross-cultural work of exploring Buddhism with them. One way of defining them would suggest that "morality" concerns precepts, rules, ideals, virtues, practices, and norms about how to live, and if we take "moral philosophy" or "ethical thought" in a general way as reflection on such matters, then it is found everywhere in Buddhist texts. Some usages of "ethics," in contrast, can be taken more narrowly to refer to the branch of philosophy that engages in a certain form of systematic reflection on morality where people stand back from their moral norms and ideas and reflect on why and how they are valued and can be justified. Arguments of justification often entail identifying the sources of morality by advancing arguments about reality or about human nature that result in ethical theories. In Western thought, at least since the time of Plato and Aristotle, one dominant mode of ethical reflection of this sort has taken place in systematic treatises justifying moral principles and ideals through abstract rational argumentation.

There is general consensus in the field of Buddhist studies that Buddhist thinkers did not offer systematic ethical theories justifying moral principles in this way, though their texts everywhere explore moral psychology, exhort moral behavior, posit moral rules and norms, and explore virtue and high moral ideals (Dreyfus 1995; Gowens 2013; Edelglass 2013). This is not because Buddhists did not practice systematic philosophy or were not adept at philosophical argumentation at all, for in the areas of metaphysics, logic, and epistemology we find works analogous to Western philosophy. Rather, in the area of morality their concerns were less abstract and more focused on practical aims of moral and religious training and transformation.

There have been a range of responses to this situation. Some contemporary scholars have attempted to construct what they take to be the implicit or tacit ethical theory underlying Buddhist moral views, a task that has involved identifying which of the three main Western ethical theories – virtue theory, consequentialism, or rule-based deontological principles – best describes Buddhist moral thought. There are those who liken Buddhism to Aristotelian virtue ethics (Keown 1992; Clayton 2006), emphasizing that Buddhists were concerned chiefly with questions of developing character. Others have seen forms of reasoning in certain Buddhist texts that can be helpfully identified as consequentialist and have gone on to argue that Buddhist ethics as a whole puts forward various forms of consequentialism (Goodman 2009). These efforts have spawned an industry of debate on these questions with scholars offering hybrid or qualified versions of these types of arguments (e.g. Vélez de Cea 2004; Harris 2015; Vasen 2018).

These constructive efforts are not without hazards. One is a tendency to treat Buddhism in holistic terms: Since the unstated theory thought to be

undergirding "Buddhist" thought is just that, largely unstated in the texts, it need not be tethered closely to particular Buddhist texts or traditions and can thence be generally posited of the tradition, or large swaths of it, rather casually. Because they aim at a very high level of abstraction and generality, such efforts tend to generalize Buddhism to the point of characterizing it with a single ethical theory (revealing "the nature of Buddhist ethics" as founding father of this style of Buddhist ethics, Damien Keown, puts it in the title of his book). This move elides the enormous diversity, heterogeneity, and contestation in moral views and approaches that emerged across Buddhism's 2,500 years of extraordinarily prolific intellectual history spanning most of the continent of Asia (and now beyond it) and across widely divergent schools, traditions, cultures, civilizations, and even scriptural corpuses. In these comparative and constructive efforts, we often lose sight of particular Buddhist thinkers and texts and the debates between them, or, when a particular thinker is showcased as evidence for the general theory, he is pressed into "representing" the whole. Those of us uneasy about this holism point out that certain Buddhist discourses resist general theories of this sort (Hallisey 1996) and may have deliberately abjured this style of abstract theory in favor of more pragmatic or phenomenological approaches. We would also note that no one assumes that 2,500 years of Western philosophy has yielded only one ethical theory; in European thought, particular thinkers and texts are studied with care and precision and an eye for difference and disagreement. Why approach Buddhist intellectual history so differently?

Another hazard is that some of these efforts assume the precedence and universalism of Western theory and take it as axiomatic that non-Western philosophy must be interpreted in its terms. Clayton, for example, asserts that "in order to make sense of Śāntideva's morality, we would have to use a framework" drawn from the West (2009: 15). Too often Western theory is assumed to be the universal form of human thought and non-Western traditions simply offer data to be assimilated to it or rationalized within its frameworks. But I think that one ambition of doing cross-cultural philosophy in the first place is a chance to achieve quite the opposite. That is, when we come to understand how Buddhists deliberated on morality in their own distinctive terms, we may discern markedly different systems that can help provincialize Western theory (by showing how it is not universal) and disrupt its hegemonies (by offering serious alternatives to it). Working closely on Buddhist thinkers by learning how to interpret their own discourses, purposes, and forms of moral thought might suggest different starting places and ways of deliberating about morality that can help us notice and reconsider bedrock assumptions of the modern West.

With these concerns in mind, my study focuses on Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva to work systematically through their modes of thinking about how to live and what is good for human beings. While not disavowing comparison – indeed comparing them to each other is a useful analytic tool for discerning both patterns and differences – my aim is not to uncover or construct a single "Buddhist" theory that they share, and still less to frame their work in Western philosophical terms (though a philosophical vocabulary and occasional analogues drawn from the West are sometimes useful in an interpretative project like this). I occasionally suggest comparative forays into non-Buddhist moral thought ranging from the Stoics to Iris Murdoch as helpful for sharpening my analysis or generating further questions, but such forays are always in the service of closer analytic work on Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva.

Although my focus is trained on the moral visions of these two ancient Indian thinkers, it might be helpful to the reader unfamiliar with the field to suggest other types of work being done in Buddhist ethics. One of the most robust areas is in applied ethics as scholars have looked to Buddhist resources to consider the ecological crisis, human rights, issues of gender and sexuality, economic and political philosophy, the ethics of war, end-of-life issues, and animal rights (see, for example, a recent volume of collected papers edited by Cozort and Shields 2018; Keown 2005; and some of the essays in Emmanuel 2013). Engaged Buddhism, a modern effort to cast Buddhism as socially and politically activist, has been well studied in the literature (King 2009; Queen and King 1996), and readers may also wish to read the Dalai Lama's writings (e.g. Gyatso 1999), and the works of B. R. Ambedkar, Thich Nhat Hanh, Pema Chödrön, and Sulak Sivaraksa as prominent examples. Though this book focuses on the Indian tradition, there is of course important work in East Asian and Tibetan moral thought that should be considered as well (here also Cozort and Shields 2018 is useful). Finally, while often neglected in considerations of philosophical ethics, anthropologists bring to the table important insights and methodological considerations about ethics and morality, some of which will have resonance with themes explored here (e.g. Desjarlais 2003; Eberhardt 2006).

I write with a diverse audience in mind, ranging from students and scholars new to Buddhism seeking to gain a foothold in its ethical traditions to more seasoned scholars who may yet find something new and provocative in these pages. Taking up two of Buddhism's most esteemed thinkers in comparative fashion can reveal some of the nuances in their approaches even as it helps the newcomer appreciate some of the complexity in the tradition.

1.2 The Human Condition

It will be useful at the outset to explicate the starting places that both Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva assume and from which they build their visions of how to live. We turn then to the insights the Buddha had about the human condition that articulate his extraordinary program of human transformation and liberation. In what has often been compared to a medical doctor's diagnosis, the Buddha articulated, in his first sermon, the Four Noble Truths: (1) life is characterized by suffering; (2) this suffering has a cause; (3) suffering can end; and (4) the Noble Eightfold Path can bring about its end.[1]

By suffering what is meant is a range of phenomena from disappointment and frustration to the suffering of old age and illness and the deep sorrow we will face in losing our loved ones and eventually experiencing our own decay and death. Of course, life does not involve *only* suffering and for the fortunate among us there may be many moments of happiness and pleasure. But these are finite and, above all, highly contingent and impossible to secure permanently. The conditions that bring us happiness are difficult to hold on to because our desires and hopes are ever changing and never satisfied. Experience itself is transient, and our youth, health, and loved ones will sooner or later slip away from us. And the conditions of the world in which we live are to a large extent out of our direct control. This sense of the provisional and conditioned nature of even our happiness is itself part of what is meant by "suffering" in this teaching.

This sober assessment of the human condition is fortunately followed by a diagnosis in the Second Truth of what causes this predicament. The Buddha discerned the cause of suffering to be the desire and craving at the heart of human psychology: We want things to be otherwise than what they are and so constantly bump up against the frustration of our wishes. The Third Truth identifies the solution or the end of human suffering, which is the ceasing of the relentless desire that drives us. The end of suffering is the end of desire, and both are "nirvana," the extraordinary and complete freedom from the contingency and suffering otherwise characteristic of human life (nirvana is variously termed "awakening" and "enlightenment" in English sources). Finally, the Fourth Truth is the doctor's prescription to achieve the end of suffering, a series of eight specific practices and reorientations that comprise a "path" to nirvana.

The Eightfold Path is presented as eight sequential items, but though there is a rationality to their ordering, they need not be developed in the order given and, in fact, each supports the others. The first is *right view*, which is understanding

[1] These four axioms are given in the Buddha's first sermon. For an accessible translation of this sermon, on which the summary in this section is based, see Bodhi 2015: 75–78 and 239–240.

intellectually and, more importantly, existentially, the Four Noble Truths. The second is *right intention*, which aims at giving up more than one needs, being harmless toward others, and having good will. The next three comprise much of what Buddhists value as morally virtuous verbal and physical actions: *right speech* (avoiding lying, slander, harsh words, and gossip); *right action* (avoiding taking life, stealing, and sexual misconduct); and *right livelihood* (practicing a means of livelihood that does not contravene the other practices of the Eightfold Path). Finally, the last three items involve the transformation of one's awareness and attention at very fundamental levels: *right effort* (restraining and abandoning toxic defilements, and developing and maintaining healthy and good states); *right mindfulness* (learning to attend to body, feeling, mind, and all experiential phenomena), and *right concentration* (developing specific kinds of meditation).

The details of this path – such as what precisely is meant by toxic defilements, healthy and good states, and so on – will be further explained, but for now it is important for the reader to see how this teaching offers an overall framework for assessing the human condition and supplies a series of moral and contemplative practices to radically transform it. These basic teachings are foundational for the visions of human transformation that both Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva develop further. And they present three key premises for how questions of the moral life are framed in the Indian Buddhist tradition and, as a result, how we are to approach them.

First, the moral life is embedded in a spiritual or religious journey. To be sure, the Buddha offered moral advice to ordinary people who may not be on this rigorous spiritual path, and when speaking with kings had much to say on moral norms of statecraft and the outlines of an ideal social order. But the early Indian Buddhist tradition's most sustained philosophical attention and reflection on what we might separate out as "morality" occurred in the context of this soteriological ideal, that is to say, in the service of spiritual liberation. It might be useful to consider the analogue of the Stoic philosophers, and indeed many premodern moral thinkers in the Western tradition, for whom philosophy was a "way of life" rather than merely rational argumentation. Or perhaps in the ancient world, rational argumentation about how to live was always in the service of actually living it in a context of a like-minded community of rule-following practitioners sharing a collective commitment to the dogmas and teleological goals of their tradition (see Hadot 1995). Buddhist thinking about morality occurred within the Eightfold Path's therapeutic practices aimed at alleviating and ultimately eliminating suffering in order to achieve the ultimate freedom from the contingency of human life that is Buddhism's highest ideal, nirvana. Though not limited to the monastic community, these teachings were

originally aimed primarily at men and women willing to leave the household life and live as celibate monks and nuns to practice them undistractedly.

Second, the moral life is conceived as a *path*. The vision articulated here and in the work of both Buddhaghosa and Śāntideva is a gradual moral development over time working toward a particular aim. Human life as it stands is inadequate and the moral life is the means to redress it in order to transcend the depredations of suffering and desire. Moral thought is thus not a matter of abstract principles, dilemma-based problems about runaway trolleys, or generating ethical theory as a purely intellectual enterprise. Rather it is always in the service of the pragmatic therapeutic and liberating ambitions of the tradition. Further, though I can only signal the issue here with a promise to come back to it later, the relationship between the path and the goal was a complex one for many Buddhist thinkers, including the two we will be studying. There are hints that the path *is* the goal in certain important respects.

Finally, the entanglement of morality and meditation in the Eightfold Path and the diagnosis of the cause of human suffering in desire and craving indicate the inescapably *psychological* nature of the whole enterprise. To take up the path is to fundamentally transform one's emotional and perceptual orientation or way of being in the world. Moral practice is a prerequisite to meditation practice, and meditation supports moral development. The ancient Indian milieu in which the Buddha was experimenting with fundamentally altering the human condition offered perhaps the most sustained and finely grained contemplative explorations of experience in human history. The Buddha's explorations and the techniques he learned to reconfigure human experience entailed meticulous scrutiny of that experience, and such scrutiny is fundamental to the path, as for example in the forms of attention required by *right mindfulness*. Thus much of our work will be exploring moral psychology and phenomenology as we consider how attention, perception, emotion, intention, and agency work and can be reconfigured.

1.3 Action, Agency, and Freedom

Foundational to the worldview of Indian Buddhism (as well as the other main religions in ancient India, including Hinduism and Jainism) are the ideas of karma and rebirth. These are essential for making sense of the nature of the human condition and the ideal of release from suffering. Karma means, at bottom, action; and actions, or at least morally relevant actions, are understood to have effects both immediate and long term on ourselves and others. This has implications for how we understand the present in two directions: looking backward and looking forward. *Looking backward* one sees the present as

shaped by past actions; *looking forward* one sees that the future will be shaped by present actions. The Buddha taught this:

> Student, beings are owners of their actions, heirs of the actions, they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, have actions as their refuge. It is action that distinguishes beings as inferior and superior (Bodhi 2015: 162).

When he speaks of our being "heir" to our actions, he means that we inherit the effects of actions done in both the recent and remote past: Past actions create and constrain who we are now. When he says that we have actions as our "refuge," he means that we can perform, now, actions that will protect us both now and in the future. In an important sense, one *is* what one *does*. If one performs low, base, and immoral things like stealing, raping, and killing, one is inferior; if one acts harmlessly, honestly, and with good will, one is superior; and both will shape the sort of being one will become.

These ideas about actions were conceived within a widely assumed worldview that included rebirth. That is, this life is not the only one: All of us have been born, lived, and died in countless times in the past. And in the future, we will continue to be reborn unless the cycle is interrupted and brought to an end by the achievement of nirvana. This doctrine has several implications for understanding the Four Noble Truths and karma. First, when the Buddha asserted that life is suffering, it was meant within this much longer trajectory of conditioned existence. If all we faced was a single lifetime, we might consider aging, loss, and death to be unfortunate but well compensated by the joys and triumphs of the rest of what life has to offer. But in the larger framework of endless rebirth (called *samsara*), the sorrows and losses that we will inevitably incur in this life are just the latest in a long stream of unending sorrows and losses as we have been born, loved, lost, gotten sick, grown old, and died in infinite previous lives in the past. And the cycle will continue relentlessly into the future. This is where the Noble Truths get their force: Life is suffering in this endless and perpetual series of ups and downs, gains and losses, births and deaths. The nature of the series is driven by desire for enduring happiness and relief from suffering in this highly conditioned, constantly changing, and unending reality. The Third Noble Truth posits the complete cessation of all suffering – nirvana – pointing to a state of total freedom removed from samsara altogether.

The mechanism of all these rebirths is karma. We are not randomly born into this or that life with this or that body, social location, set of capacities, and so on, but rather attain them according to our deeds. There are two levels of understanding this. The first is that the world works in a just way: If one performs bad actions (traditionally there are ten), one faces the consequences of those actions

in hell or a low or inferior birth as an animal, ghost, or unfortunate human. The ten bad actions are killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossip, covetousness, ill will, and holding false views (Bodhi 2015: 156–161). Conversely, moral actions (refraining from the ten bad actions) land one in a high human birth or a heavenly world. None of these lasts forever (there is neither eternal damnation nor final resting place in heaven in Buddhism) as the unremitting and conditioned nature of the whole thing churns ever onward. One eventually wears off the karma that resulted in one's just rewards and is plunged into another birth based on additional actions one has accrued.

A second level for understanding this is more psychologically subtle than a tit-for-tat notion of actions and their recompense. In this way of seeing it, actions create who we are as they habituate and shape our dispositions, modes of awareness, and capacities. To become a killer practiced in violence is to coarsen one's awareness, dull one's sensitivity, harden one's heart, and become increasingly angry, callous, and predatory. And the world does not treat such a person well. It thus seems "natural" to Buddhists that such a person is creating a future in this life and the next of being a predatory and violent animal or hell being. Conversely, one given to goodwill and peaceful modes of practice and awareness is creating and habituating a way of being whereby in a future life one will "naturally" become a spiritually advanced human or deity conditioned by the calm and pleasant modes of awareness that one has developed. Human nature in this sense is not fixed or static – we are and we become what we do.

Although some modern Buddhist figures (such as Stephen Batchelor) have questioned or downplayed samsara in their formulations of Buddhism, samsara and karma are foundational for the Buddha, Buddhaghosa, and Śāntideva, and it will be difficult to make sense of their moral and soteriological paths without them. Once again, these ideas have crucial implications for our purposes of figuring out the nature of moral inquiry in this tradition.

It can appear at first that this is a framework for thinking about morality that is centered on action and, therefore, moral attention is trained on establishing what sort of actions create what sort of consequences. Indeed, Buddhism is full of varying lists of moral prescriptions and proscriptions about action, such as avoiding the ten bad actions, practicing right speech, action, livelihood, and taking the five precepts (vowing to avoid taking life, sexual misconduct, lying, stealing, and intoxicants). But the Buddha also repeatedly emphasized intention and the psychological dimensions of action. In a sense we can say that killing and stealing are bad not only because they harm others, ruin one's reputation, corrode social life, and so on (all effects pointed out by the Buddha), but also because they issue from hatred and greed

and in turn reinforce and habituate these and other toxic defilements (the main toxic defilements are greed, hatred, and delusion, but there are related afflictions such as delusion, pride, obstinacy, and so on). The Buddha thought that close phenomenological introspection reveals that whatever the nature of their psychic energy or charge, the toxic defilements are themselves forms of suffering and, in so far as they coarsen and cloud one's experience and issue in karmically significant actions, they of course generate further suffering. Moreover, the Buddha considered "mental actions" (thoughts which do not issue in speech or physical action) to be karmically significant as well. A flash of anger is toxic to oneself even if it does not lead to actual harm to others.

Thus, the state of our mental lives is ultimately responsible for our actions. This returns us to issues of psychology and the role of feeling, perception, emotion, attention, and mastery of one's psychological experience in the moral life, and we can begin to see why three items of the Eightfold Path center on attention to one's experience (*right mindfulness*), sustained effort to remove and keep away toxic defilements and to plant and maintain positive experiences in their place (*right effort*), and meditation techniques to help one achieve this (*right concentration*).

A further consideration is necessary before we can move on from action and karma, and that is how Buddhists think about agency and freedom. The picture of human experience emerging in this account indicates that although humans are highly pliable and constantly changing, and although we differ considerably across individuals, our general condition is full of toxic defilements. We have already seen how craving drives our dissatisfaction in samsara and causes suffering. But we are also prone to anger and aversion when our desires are thwarted and when others make incursions upon us or attain what we desire, and we often fall prey to resentment, envy, ill will, covetousness, and all manner of hatred. Further, we are subject to both routine and grotesque delusions about things, not least about the Four Noble Truths themselves, but also about what will make us happy and at peace. Desire and aversion, indeed emotions of all sorts, constrict and distort our vision and perception, fostering delusion that in turn narrows how we might perceive what actions are even possible. In this conception of human experience, agency is often highly restricted: The more we are clouded by our afflictive emotions, distorted modes of perception, and problematic patterns of thinking, the less free we are to act intelligently and well. We are, in fact, profoundly *unfree*. It is not that Buddhists denied freedom, but they considered freedom to be something one gradually achieves to the extent that one succeeds in removing toxic and confining emotional, perceptual, and ideological blinders and constrictions. And, of course, freedom is the *telos*